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steel nibs are sprouting

NEW DALIT WRITING FROM SOUTH INDIA

Dossier II
Kannada and Telugu

edited and introduced by
K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu

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SOUTH INDIA

DOSSIER II: KANNADA AND TELUGU

Edited and Introduced by

K. SATYANARAYANA AND SUSIE THARU

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SIDDI

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List of Abbreviations

ABSM	Arundathiyar Bandhu Seva Mandali
ASA	Dr B.R. Ambedkar Students' Association
AYS	Ambedkar Yuvajana Sangham
APCLC	Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee
AISF	All India Students' Federation
BRP	Bahujan Republican Party
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CITU	Centre of Indian Trade Unions
CPI (ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist)
DAFODAM	Democratic Action Forum for Dalits and Minorities
DMS	Dalit Maha Sabha
DSF	Dalit Students' Federation
DSS	Dalit Sangharsh Samiti
DSU	Dalit Students' Union
KPSC	Karnataka Public Service Commission
MISA	Maintenance of Internal Security Act
MRHS	Madiga Misalati Horata Samiti
MRPS	Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti
OBC	Other Backward Classes
PDSU	Progressive Democratic Students' Union
POW	Progressive Organization of Women
PUC	Pre-University Course
PW	People's War
RCS	Raitu Coolie Sangham
RSU	Radical Students' Union
RYL	Radical Youth League
SC	Scheduled Caste
ST	Scheduled Tribe

SSLC	Secondary School Leaving Certificate
SVF	Samata Volunteer Force
SYS	Samajwadi Yuvajana Sabha
TDP	Telugu Desam Party
TRS	Telangana Rashtra Samiti
VIRASAM	Viplava Rachayitala Sangham

Introduction

Most readers would know the story of Ekalavya, the legendary, self-taught, 'lower caste' archer whose skills outshone those of Arjuna, the favoured student of the brahmin guru, Dronacharya. Talented and passionate about archery, Ekalavya longs to study with Dronacharya and seeks him out, but on learning of his caste, the guru rejects him. A disappointed Ekalavya returns to the forest, makes a clay model of the guru and proceeds to teach himself. Some years later, apprehensive about the extraordinary skills Ekalavya had developed, the guru asks him for the traditional fee due to a teacher. He makes only a modest request: Ekalavya's right thumb.

As Sikhamani's poem 'Steel Nibs are Sprouting' suggests, thumb stub no longer symbolizes a shishya's respect for the guru. It stands for the law that externs dalits from the world of the arts, knowledge and power. The Dossier in your hand documents an upsurge, beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century, when those on the outside reject the role assigned to them in such stories, rename themselves, write of contemporary 'outsides' and present-day 'insides', and set out their dreams for another world. Dossier I maps the intellectual and artistic moves that mark, as well as comprise, this event in Tamil and Malayalam[1]. This second collection is from Kannada and Telugu.

We use the term 'dossier' mindfully, for this is an open-ended collection. It brings together most of the key figures and founding texts and includes contributions from different regions and castes. The texts are literary, critical and analytical; on occasion when an appropriate or representative text was not available we have carried an interview. However, we are also happily conscious that the collection is not exhaustive. Movements such as these that reposition a people gather communities in new ways, and transform the discussion on an issue—sometimes called epistemic breaks—necessarily involving hundreds of voices, a variety of forms and many different kinds of documents, of which only a few have been represented here. For example, although the songs of H. Janardhan, Gaddar, Gorati Venkanna or Pichchali Srinivas are mentioned many times in the texts and biographical headnotes, we have not even begun to grapple with the significance of a music that accessed living repositories of artistic skill and memory, gave these movements their passionate and imaginative reach, and—as a by-product—opened up a whole world of popular Indian music obscured by the authority of the classical forms.

We retain that open-ended format in this introductory essay as well. The account here of founding events and discussion of key issues is designed to supplement the texts and headnotes and be read alongside them. We flesh out incidents such as the boosa agitation that gave a new momentum to literary and political expression in Kannada, or the Karamchedu massacre around which the new discussion on caste emerged in Telugu. We take note of major organizations, such as the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, Dalit Mahasabha and Madiga Dandora, that arise from those inaugural events and point to the literature and politics that they gave rise to. The specific ideological lineages (and the rich reworking of Ambedkar, Lohia, Gandhi and Marx) of each region as well as the cross-currents that connect them are traced, and some key questions that have emerged —among them the dalit woman question, the 'sub-caste' movements, and their engagement with questions of culture and identity—are explored.

Boosa, the Kannada Literary World and the DSS School

'On or about December 1910,' Virginia Woolf once proclaimed in a talk on the English novel, 'human character changed' (Woolf 1924:5). The implications, she pointed out, are momentous: 'when such a shift takes place, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature …' (Ibid.: 11).

'And so,' she continued, 'the smashing and the crashing began. Thus it is that we hear all round us, in poems and novels and biographies, even in newspaper articles and essays, the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction …' (Ibid.: 21). Given the reverence with which they are regarded today in literary circles, it might surprise us that James Joyce and T.S. Eliot are among the unruly iconoclasts that she names.

If we were to seek out a moment with similar scope in the Kannada-speaking world, it would be 19 November 1973. At a seminar on 'New Waves' organized by the Dr Ambedkar School of Thought in Mysore, B. Basavalingappa, minister of town administration, is reported to have said something like: 'there is a great deal of boosa in Kannada literature'. This 'handsome and always dapper' minister had begun his talk by commenting on the demand that all education in the state should be in Kannada. 'We should have Kannada pride, speak Kannada, strive to make it grow; but we get ideas, independent thinking and patriotic feeling by reading English,' he is reported to have said before he added the now historic comment about Kannada literature.[2]

Basavalingappa's biographer, N.K. Hanumanthaiah writes: 'The words struck the hall like lightning and spread like a tempest across the state'. Angry defenders of tradition took to the streets demanding his resignation. Students played a key role in the protests. There were meetings, processions, street fights, heated arguments in literary forums across the state, as well as attacks on the government in the Legislative

Assembly. At the head of a big procession taken out in Bangalore on 26 November were two donkeys wearing garlands of worn-out chappals and carrying sideboards with his name. A few days later, pro-Basavalingappa students also attempted to take out a procession but were prevented by the police from entering Cubbon Park. Events took place, against and for, all over the state. In Mysore, his supporters shouted slogans against *Prajavani* and *Deccan Herald*, as well as against Javare Gowda, vice chancellor of Mysore University, and burnt copies of newspapers.[3] In Shimoga, the Hindu Mahasabha asked for Basavalingappa's dismissal, while in Gadag, municipal sweepers took mass leave and threatened to stop cleaning the city if he was forced to resign (Shetty 1978: 42–46). What sort of break, we might ask, did this fault line represent? How did it appear without warning and what made it such a radical one?[4] An adequate answer to this question must unpack the disturbance caused by the statement, but more importantly, it must open up the interests at stake in the agitation that followed.

Boosa is the Kannada word for the chaff and husk that form the filler part of cattle feed. The connotation, however, is better captured by the colloquial term 'hogwash'. The comment did a number of things. One, it brushed past conventional authorities and established rituals of Kannada literary criticism and, without so much as a by-your-leave to them, put forth an individual opinion. In the process, Basavalingappa had not simply offended some individuals, he had challenged the upper-caste authority over Kannada literature and culture that had remained unquestioned for many decades.[5] Two, though shocking and irreverent in its formulation, his observation carried the ring of a truth that seemed obvious once it had been stated. It gave rise to wide discussion and received endorsement from different quarters. While some groups were quick to come to his support (dalits, rationalists), others followed, some earlier than others (non-brahmin groups, the Left, upper-caste writers and intellectuals).[6] Three, when he implied that from the point of view of those concerned with equality (patriotism, nationalism) or freedom (independent thinking), a great deal of Kannada literature was worthless, he set up criteria of judgement that were not, strictly speaking, *literary*. As can be seen in B. Krishnappa's essay in this volume, an important question raised was whether transformations in literature, be they formal or thematic, arise from within or without. Four, Basavalingappa carried the rough-hewn, direct speech of the common people, their metaphor and a lived geography centred on the cowshed into the elite portals of the literary establishment and thereby also opened its hitherto closed doors to a huge new section of society. Five, he was fearless and unapologetically provocative. Underlying the uproar that resulted was probably also the indignation that a *dalit* had assumed that he had the authority to evaluate Kannada culture. 'The roots of the Kannada literary world began to shake,' N.K. Hanumanthaiah writes. Looking back, it is clear that far more than the *literary* world was being challenged.

Basavalingappa weathered the attack for some weeks and, as we shall see, his supporters took the debate and the action to altogether new levels. Finally, when it looked as though the Urs government itself might fall, he was forced to resign. The historical victory, however, is on the dalit side. And that story—one of loosening the hold of a long-standing authority of the landed castes in Karnataka, and the rapid rise of dalit self-confidence, creativity and political presence after the mid-1970s—is one of the big stories that this anthology tells. Several Kannada writers showcased here were part of the boosa chaluvali (agitation) and were among those who in 1974 formed the Dalita Lekhaka Kalavidhara Balaga (Daleka), which later in the same year expanded the scope of its work to become the legendary DSS (Dalit Sangharsh Samiti). But before we move to the DSS story, a few lines to sketch in a background and point to the interests involved in this confrontation.

At the time when these dramatic events took place, Karnataka's first non-lingayat, non-vokkaliga chief minister, Devraj Urs, was in power. The lingayats and vokkaligas are dominant landed groups. They represent amalgams of non-dalit and non-backward caste groups.[7] Though the lingayats, as followers of the famed twelfth-century reformer-philosopher Basava are technically casteless, in effect they represent the elite and brahminized traditional authority. The vokkaligas are a more recent grouping of agricultural castes. Urs won the 1972 elections for the Congress party. He was aware that he would not find support among these landed dominant castes and recruited into his government bright young political activists from the backward castes and dalits. The composition of the Urs government and its open recognition of caste power and caste interests signalled the displacement of a masked upper-caste authority that had long assumed the right to speak for all Kannadigas. The distinguished Malnadu novelist, K.V. Puttappa (Kuvempu), inaugurates this 'shudra' moment in Kannada literature. Basavalingappa, then in his early thirties, was the youngest minister and soon established himself as a spokesperson for the dalits. Among the government's achievements were land reforms (compared by several commentators to those in Kerala), rural electrification, ('a bulb in every house' was a hugely popular election promise), hostels for backward caste and minority students, stipends for graduates awaiting employment, and other initiatives directed at constituencies that had thus far been largely overlooked. Basavalingappa himself was instrumental in introducing a strongly opposed bill banning the carrying of night soil (the Act came into force a good two decades before this happened at the national level in 1993). Urs's key opponents were those aligned with right-wing Hindu groups. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's newspaper, *Organizer*, played an important role in drumming up the reaction to Basavalingappa and providing support to the agitators—the powerful Pejawara Swamy, who headed the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and preached 'harijan uplift', as well as upper-caste members of the Urs Cabinet.[8]

A majority of those who rallied around Basavalingappa at the time of the attacks were first generation dalit students who, through reservations, had made their way from the villages into the university (though some nondalit progressive writers and rationalists also came to his support). Universities and colleges, and especially the social welfare hostels, were hubs of activity, and soon became the studios in which a whole new Kannada literature took shape. Young people, many of them barely into their twenties, found themselves at the heart of the controversy. They argued back, fought, made new friends and, most important, began to appreciate their stake in Kannada life and Kannada culture. This was also the point when they turned to Ambedkar for inspiration, studied his work seriously, organized in discussions and protests and travelled through the villages to set up dalit forums there.[9] Siddalingaiah, then in the first year of his MA, was a leading figure, and went on to become one of the three main founders of the DSS. He is widely regarded as one who, along with Devanoora Mahadeva, created a new literary language and established a dalit voice in literature. In his entertaining autobiography, *Ooru Keri*,[10] which may well be regarded as one of the classics of Indian literature, he provides us with some ringside comments on the boosa event.

As we found when we interviewed those who were part of the DSS, the magic of that moment does not pall in the retelling. They stress the creativity that was unleashed, the leadership and initiative it nurtured, the support it received from non-dalits and the huge response that emerged from dalits across the state. 'In DSS, everyone was a writer or an artist,' Thumbadi Ramaiah told us in an interview. An astounding number found not only a new confidence in themselves but also a whole new sense of the depth and significance of what they had to say. And what is equally important, they found a large readership, not only of dalits, that was open to learning from them. When Mahadeva's short story 'Amasa' was first published in 1973, the reception it received was overwhelming. His classmates organized a seminar on the story and this first year MA student found himself receiving letters addressed to *Professor* Devanoora Mahadeva! Mahadeva played a key role in consolidating a writers' group and his writing was instrumental in securing a leading place for dalit writing in Kannada literature.[11] His collection of short stories, *Dyavanooru* (1973), was the first book in what is today known as Kannada dalit literature. Siddalingaiah's poetry, hitherto short compositions that he read aloud at college competitions, made a leap—literary as much as political—when it found itself on the stage that DSS created. His songs, later collected in *Holemaadigara Hadu* (Songs of the Holeya and Madiga, 1975), set to music and sung by Jenni at huge meetings where the audience sang along, gathered thousands into one voice. Impassioned compositions, such as 'Thousands of Rivers' or 'Bash Them, Kick Them', became iconic of the movement, while tender invocations of community, such as 'My People' or 'The Dalits are Here', gave it a heart. H.S. Shivaprakash (2002: 123)

observes, referring to Mahadeva and Siddalingaiah, 'While Dalit Sangharsh Samiti was gearing itself up to transform Karnataka society, these writers had already created a new literary language.'

When DSS burst onto the scene in the mid-1970s, the dominant literary trend in Kannada was the formally self-conscious Navya writing (Tharakeshwar, forthcoming). The arrival of DSS also marks the decline of Navya. Describing Navya from the point of view of the new dalit literature, the critic and activist Banjagere Jayaprakash told us in an interview (Bangalore, 11 February 2011): 'Navya was very academic and technical. The writers were mostly English lecturers, middle class and brahmin. The issues they were concerned about were personal—familial or sexual—and largely internal to the middle class. Navya writing had no social consciousness. There were well-known dalit writers too—N. Narasimaiah, the writer of detective fiction, is an example—but they did not have a dalit consciousness.[12] This was also true of G. Venkataiah, a second-division clerk in the Mysore administration, who had written his autobiography and also published a novel.' DSS changed everything. The new generation of writers was socially invested. They drew inspiration from Buddha, Marx, Ambedkar and Lohia. The stories and poems that they wrote were about themselves and their worlds; about villages that in the earlier literature had been frozen in tradition or extolled as a rural idyll, but now became places grappling with modernity. Their poetry, rendered as song by popular dalit musicians, and accompanied by the rhythm of the tamate, gathered huge crowds of dalits and others at the meetings they held all over the state. In terms of language, there were spectacularly creative initiatives to render the Kannada spoken in the keri into a literary idiom.

'What is Dalit Literature?' Professor B.M. Puttaiah asks in a key essay in this volume. His answer is also a statement about the need to transform the very basis of our understanding of what counts as 'literature', and our sense of the knowledge necessary for its appreciation. Dalit literature, he writes, 'is the literature that captures the desire, dreams, belief, agony, suffering, violence, humiliation, impatience, dissatisfaction, rage and resistance of dalits'. But it is also equally 'the historical moment that saw the birth of DSS in Karnataka; the various agitations launched by the DSS, its programmes, growth, the numerous pamphlets, wall graffiti, banners, magazine articles that were produced, the 200-odd protest songs it gave rise to; the inspiring and efficacious speeches of B. Krishnappa, Siddalingaiah, Shivanna Kandegalu, Ashwath Antyaja, V. Nagaraj, R. Manasaiah, Tyagi, Mulluru Nagaraj; singers of protest songs such as Kolar Venkatesh, Pichchalli Srinivas, Col. Narayanaswamy, P. Velayudhan, R. Manasaiah, C. Dhanappa and others who have performed in many villages, who've played the dappu to the rhythm of the songs; those who have sung in the chorus; then there is the play about Patre Sangappa that has an impact similar to that of his brutal murder itself; research and study camps; jatra ; protest marches, slogans shouted at those marches;

political party programmes; agitations for various causes; each issue of the newspaper *Panchama*; reports of the many strikes held by the DSS; proclamations made by newspapers; statements issued to the press by organizations; heartfelt talk between the dalit activists about these issues; the words that were cooked up in the hot belly of the oppressor as reaction to the dalit talk are what we have on one side.'

If the boosa chaluvali had begun as a reaction, it soon transformed into a proactive movement. Rather than bargain for space in the brahminical, Sanskritic and self-consciously national mode of elite Kannada culture, these activists created their own space. Kannada culture, they said, belonged to them as much as it did to anyone else; so did Karnataka—and indeed India. Siddalingaiah, K.B. Siddaiah and others brought straight talk, direct address and startling new imagery into poetic diction. Set to music —most famously by H. Janardhan (Jenni)—in rhythms and tunes heard for the first time in the cities, the songs were a big attraction at public meetings. Young people led the singing. 'Many times,' Siddalingaiah observed in an interview (27 March 2011), 'I understood the real meaning and all the implications of my own poem when I heard Jenni sing it!' Mahadeva noted in 1989 that for existing as well as aspiring dalit writers, Basavalingappa and the boosa chaluvali 'opened the door to a palace of opportunity to express their rejection of their own place in Karnataka society' (cited in Mandelson and Vieziny 2000: 215).

When it began in 1973, Daleka worked in collaboration with the Karnataka Barahagarara Okkoota, a forum supported by the rationalists as well as the Progressive Writers' Group. The Okkoota was inaugurated by Basavalingappa at a meet attended by the majority of non-brahmin Kannada writers. A souvenir, *Panchali*, edited and published by the influential intellectual and editor Lankesh, was quickly sold out. The overwhelming response to the event and the rich discussions that took place shocked the predominantly brahmin literary establishment. Encouraged by the success of this event and upset by the reluctance of the non-brahmin writers and intellectuals of the Okkoota to take up issues of untouchability, a group of dalit writers got together to form another forum, Daleka. A conference they had earlier organized in Bhadravathi had attracted dalit students from all over the state. They were buoyed by the enthusiasm with which Daleka was received and the significance of the issues raised in its discussions. They were also mindful of the attacks they faced and the responsibility they had to their people. Very soon, they decided that the organization should take on the character of a social movement and expand to cover the whole state.

That was how, one evening after a Daleka meeting and over dinner in one of their houses, the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti was born. 'Earlier, we had Ambedkar study groups, but this was an organization committed to struggle,' Siddaiah commented (interview, 4 April 2011). 'We started DSS to defend life and property,' Siddalingaiah told us,

recalling an incident where, just after he had addressed students there, the hostel was set on fire. The boosa agitation is the cradle of the dalit movement in Karnataka. Devanoora Mahadeva, Siddalingaiah, Giriappa, Chandraprasad Tyagi, K.B. Siddaiah, Indudhara Honnapura, Devaiah Harve, M.N. Javaraiah, H. Govindaiah, K. Ramaiah and many of the other writers featured here were among the founder members or joined the organization shortly after. Mahadeva's suggestion that B. Krishnappa, a young college lecturer from Bhadravathi, be named convenor was accepted by all. One of their first initiatives was to write to all districts asking people to start DSS units. Students began holding meetings in colleges. 'I rarely attended classes for more than fifteen to twenty days a year, but my teachers gave me attendance and I did well in the exams,' Indudhara Honnapura recalled (interview, 3 April 2011). 'Five or six of us travelled like anything, without tickets, disappearing into the toilet when the TT came round. Within three or four months, DSS had spread all over Karnataka. We had nothing—no recognition, no money, not even real respect—but we were strong,' he observed. The organization also met with support from writers and intellectuals across caste lines. 'Most writers, irrespective of their caste, supported DSS,' Mahadeva observed. Many others recalled with warmth the support they received from their teachers (interview, 25 April 2011).

The Dalit Panthers of Maharashtra who had burst on the literary and political scene in the early 1970s were also an inspiration: 'We read about the Panthers in a *Hindu* special supplement,' Siddalingaiah recalled. Given the context in which they were working and the alliances they actually made—with progressives, rationalists and the Lohiaite Raitha Sangha—it is not surprising that the DSS position was an original blend of Ambedkar, Marx and Lohiaite socialism. Their journal, *Panchama*, was started in 1974 and quickly became an important forum for new writing, information and debate. Much of the burst of brilliant poetry, fiction, drama and criticism now associated with the DSS years first found their way into print in *Panchama*, as did compositions by many unlettered composers, who hitherto had not been thought of as poets—even by themselves.

Among the struggles taken up by the organization were those of land—the assignment of government lands or alienation of lands that dalits had traditionally cultivated—against bonded labour, atrocities by the upper castes and support for inter-caste marriages. Krishnappa led an important battle over three years against an annual temple festival in which dalit women worship in the nude.[13]

The boosa chaluvali not only *created* dalit intellectuals and writers, it also brought them together—and the energy of that moment continued to shape and inspire the next two generations of dalit writers and critics in Karnataka. In fact, the arrival of these new writers changed the face of Kannada literature itself. In 1979, the new dalit writers came together with socialists, liberals, those from the Left, and a number of anti-

Congress groups, all committed to a more just and equitable society to form the Bandaya Sahitya Chaluvali (Rebel Literary Movement). *Bandaya* was the title of a collection of poems that came out in 1978 featuring the work of these writers. The grouping, more commonly known as Dalit–Bandaya, gave rise to memorable and productive collaborations in theatre, media and literature. Indudhara Honnapura, Baraguru Ramachandrappa and Siddalingaiah were the first convenors of the organization, which positioned itself in opposition to the official Kannada Sahitya Parishat, which they described as pro-establishment, anti-people and anti-dalit. The Telugu Digambara movement poets, Cherabanda Raju, Nikhileshwar and Jwalamukhi, were important sources of inspiration, as was the famous people's singer from Andhra Pradesh, Gaddar, who was also dalit. D.R. Nagaraj was a key figure in the Bandaya movement and nearly all dalit writers participated in it.

It is difficult to say exactly when 'dalit literature' appears in the discussion as a conceptual category. In an expanded and edited versions of his 1993 book, D.R. Nagaraj identifies the mid-1970s as the time when 'Dalit writing made its powerful presence felt,' through Devanoora Mahadeva's fiction and Siddalingaiah's poetry (Nagaraj 2010: 218). On careful examination, however, we find that this is a post hoc description that does not seriously attend to the history of the term and the debates in which it arose. For that we may have to turn to the 1979 essay translated here, in which B. Krishnappa addresses questions that were emerging with regard to the category, principally in relation to the new dalit–bandaya alliance. Krishnappa's polemical article is an early example of the more Ambedkarite stand that combines questions of authority, power and innerness, or experience, by asserting that dalit writing is writing by those who are dalits by birth. The bandaya position on this may be found in a statement by Baraguru Ramachandrappa, a key figure in that movement, who stresses the 'rebel' orientation of the writer. 'All progressive dalit writers are bandaya writers, but not all bandaya writers are dalit writers' (cited in Amur 2001: 14). As we will find in the section on ideological legacies, more open and self-conscious Ambedkarism appears only with the second-generation writers, such as Aravinda Malagatti. Mogalli Ganesh, another important writer of the second generation, locates his dalit experiences in the canvas of humanity as a whole and situates himself in the mainstream Kannada literary world.

Recalling the magic of the early DSS days, Mahadeva commented: 'There were quarrels in public meetings—big discussions about caste, class, literature, but our relationship stayed strong; brotherhood was not disturbed. During a land struggle in Hassan district, all disadvantaged castes came together to take over government land and live together. So many rare experiments took place.' K Ramaiah speaks of DSS as 'a big school, also a university, a real university. The question we need to ask today is what made it a place of real education' (interview, 3 April 2011).

The energy of this movement—which may indeed be the only dalit movement in the country that took on the form of a mass movement, had a dalit leadership and a cadre of intellectuals, and produced a strikingly original dalit literature, as well as influential theory and criticism—is admirable and inspiring. But no discussion of the DSS today can overlook the divisions that took place and the fact that today nothing like the original organization is in place, though many of the early figures continue to be active.[14] 'Dalits did not know how to handle politics,' Mahadeva comments. Commenting from outside these divides, Malagatti observes, 'It appears that there is no dalit movement. But it is there, like a river flowing in different directions.'[15]

Karamchedu: A Historic Shift in Politics and Literature

Katti Padma Rao, dalit leader and writer, sums up the historical significance of Karamchedu thus: 'The Karamchedu struggle gave birth to many critical events; it developed several original forms of agitation; it produced some leaders and many activists. In fact, there is a sense in which the Karamchedu struggle is the foundation for all the recent changes in the attitude and stance of dalits.'[16] Padma Rao is underlining here the new forms in which dalit assertion is taking place: organizations, activists and leaders, as well as the crucial triggering and energizing role of the Karamchedu massacres and the struggles that emerged in its wake. In fact, it is widely accepted today that Karamchedu laid the 'foundation' for the rise of dalits in the political, social and intellectual domains. A brief mapping of the important questions that Karamchedu opened up is essential and will also serve as an introduction to Telugu dalit writing.

On 17 July 1985, a group of kammas (mostly men) attacked the madigas in the village. This ghastly incident changed the very meaning of the word Karamchedu. Karamchedu is not just a village now. It marks the rise of the kamma caste and its political authority in coastal Andhra. It also makes visible the consolidation of the dominant peasant castes and their social and economic power in post-Independence India. More important from our point of view, it is a historic site that marks the beginnings of dalit resistance to caste authority in the form of a dalit movement. The context of the Karamchedu killings, Padma Rao argues, also provided the historical foundation for Telugu dalit literature. 'The hold of caste remained intact; dalit localities became killing fields, habitations of landless poor dalits were attacked, burnt and looted every day, in a routine manner. But the heroic dalits rebelled. Dalit literature was born out of this oppression, this caste violence' (Padma Rao 2005). The Karamchedu struggle, it is significant to note, inaugurated a shift in the way both politics and literature were understood.

This, briefly is what happened. There was an initial altercation on 16 July 1985. While two kamma youths were feeding and bathing buffaloes beside the village tank that

lay close to the madigapalle, Suvartamma, a madiga woman, came to collect drinking water. She objected to the fact that the youths were bathing their buffaloes in the tank, saying that the drinking water would be dirtied. This led to a heated exchange. When the kamma youth turned to whip her with a plaited rope, she raised her pot to protect herself. This minor dispute between individuals was not reported to the police. However, it roused much passion among the kammas. What angered them was that a dalit woman had not only talked back but had also 'raised her arm'. The kamma caste described the madiga woman's protest as misbehaviour. Normal behaviour would have required her to keep silent and accept the caste superiority of the kammas. In order to reaffirm kamma pride and authority, the kammas (about 3,000 of them) were mobilized from seven neighbouring villages and they attacked the madigas en masse. Six men were killed and three women raped in this assault. All but twenty of the 300 dalit families left the village to take shelter in a church in Chirala, a nearby town.[17]

Karamchedu shocked and puzzled intellectuals and activists. Why did 'the atrocity on harijans' (this was how the event was referred to in the media) take place? Was it because the madigas had grown poorer and weaker, and had become socially marginalized in post-Independence India? How might one explain the caste form (kammas vs madigas) of the conflict? What is the significance of 'Karamchedu' for an understanding of politics and culture?

Karamchedu is a large and 'developed' village in coastal Andhra. Kammas constitute about 6,000 in the total village population of 10,000. 'Harijans' (who include the two numerically large scheduled castes in Andhra Pradesh: madigas and malas) number around 1,500 and, of this, madigas account for about 1,000. Kammas are the dominant peasant caste in the village. Among the kammas, there is a small section of big landlords who cultivate cash crops like cotton and tobacco. They are also the ones who have invested in the cinema industry, and trade in cotton and tobacco. The 'harijans' are mostly agricultural labourers, farmhands and also tenant cultivators. They do not own land. The shift in the agricultural sector from food crops to cash crops, and the related expansion of new occupations enabled 'harijans' to move away from caste-ordained traditional occupations. This relative autonomy (loosening of restrictions), State programmes of social welfare and modern public spaces (transport, educational institutions, cinema halls, etc.) have had one significant effect: they have weakened what had been the total control of the dominant upper castes. Relative mobility also became possible due to the decline of traditional caste occupations linked to agriculture. Young people began going to school, were making it into college, and travelling by bus or train to the nearby town or to other villages to work. In other words, the 'harijans' had begun violating traditional caste norms on a number of fronts: practices of untouchability, ordained labour practices, bonded servitude, sexual and economic subordination. They were no longer dependent on the kamma landlords for

work because they could earn their wages from all the surrounding villages. What is more, they had become conscious of their dignity and rights. In the famous song 'Dalita Pululamma', Gaddar captures the essence of dalit assertion in Karamchedu village.[18] Referring to the dalit youth as tigers, he sings:

Youngsters built like weightlifters
Well versed in martial arts, as well as education;
Ask those who belittle and denigrate them
to mind their language.
They wear sparkling white clothes,
move in their hamlet like jasmines.
'We may not own property,
but we have self-respect,' they say.
When we sip coffee sitting on a chair,
rich lords seethe with anger.
'We are not living off someone else's father;
we are spending our own money; it is our right,' they say.

The demand for self-respect and human dignity are at the centre of this assertion. As a result, the village tank, the village well, the cinema hall, the school, the public road—indeed all public spaces that were formerly out of bounds—turned out to be sites of violence against dalits. But that was not all. Prior to the killings, the madigas had voted for the Congress, ignoring the kamma demand that they vote for the newly set up Telugu Desam Party (TDP). The kammas were extremely upset with this behaviour, which they viewed as violating the caste order and caste restrictions. The mass killings of 'harijans' were a way of reasserting their caste authority.

It is important to understand the crucial break between caste relations and the present mass killings. These killings are not simply a continuation of the caste relations and conflicts of the pre-colonial period. These atrocities (what passes in the now-routinized phrase 'atrocities on harijans' are actually torture, rape, burning of the huts and property, displacement and mass killings) are a phenomenon that has emerged in recent times. The perpetrators of caste atrocities, in this case the kammas, are mobilized as a caste group and the victims, here the 'harijans', are identified and killed as a caste group. Caste conflict is, therefore, at the heart of the Karamchedu killings. In order to understand this polarization of the people on caste lines and the centrality of caste in the massacre, we may need to consider the socio-political developments in coastal Andhra

from the 1950s onwards. Land reforms—a policy of redistribution of land to landless tenant farmers—put an end to the old intermediaries, such as zamindars, as well as to tenancy. The Green Revolution strategy in agricultural development is another important state-initiated measure that contributed to the rise of a new class of landed castes.[19] The Andhra Pradesh Land Reforms (Ceiling on Agriculture Holdings) Act passed in 1973, through a series of initiatives such as abolition of intermediaries, tenancy reforms, ceiling legislation and so on, had the important effect of strengthening the peasant castes (kamma, reddy and kapu) by conferring on them the ownership of land. In the village, the interests of these newly empowered castes are in the land, but over the middle decades of the twentieth century they also developed business interests (agro-industries, cinema, hotels and contracts) that extended to the towns. The 'provincial propertied class' is the term K. Balagopal, a Marxist thinker and human rights activist, coins to refer to this new social group who are further empowered by the land reforms. The Green Revolution strategy of state subsidy for the modernization of agriculture benefited only this provincial propertied class, and they consolidated themselves as dominant castes. The thesis that modern development, spearheaded through state policies, would also undermine and eliminate caste violence and caste power, proved to be incorrect.

It is not accidental that the kamma desire for political power found expression in the formation of the TDP in 1982. The founder of the TDP, N.T. Ramarao, a popular film actor and a kamma by caste, was elected as the chief minister in 1983. The rise of a kamma to political power added a new dimension to their social and economic dominance. What is more, Karamchedu revealed that the parliamentary Left parties, the CPI and CPI (M), were more popular among the propertied castes in coastal Andhra than among the Scheduled Castes.[20] To make matters worse, the Left parties formed an electoral alliance with the ruling TDP, which represented the kamma caste and other dominant social groups. The Congress too—although when the massacre took place, it raised a hue and cry about Karamchedu—as the party in power for more than three decades, had strengthened the rural landed castes, such as reddy, kamma and kapu in coastal Andhra. At the same time, it retained the scheduled castes as a vote bank, with the offer of welfare schemes.

In its report, the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC 1985: 9) observed, 'Karamchedu is a microcosm of the coastal belt'. A premodern caste divide was actually refurbished and reinforced in the post-Independence period. It is in this context that the relative improvement of dalit life intensified caste conflict, and the region was engulfed in a series of violent killings. The dalit poet Kalekuri Prasad gives expression to this:

I was Shambuka in the Treta yuga.

Twenty-two years ago, I was Kanchikacherla Kotesu.
My birthplace is Kilvenmani, Karamchedu, Neerukonda.
Now, 'Chunduru' is the name the cold-blooded cruelty of landlords has
tattooed on my heart with their ploughs.
Chunduru is not a proper noun any longer. It's become a common one.
Each heart is now a Chunduru, a fiery tumour.
I'm the wound of the people, a communion of wounds.
For ages, a slave in a free country, subject to insult, atrocity, rape,
torture, someone raising his head for a fistful of self-respect.[21]

So, upper-caste violence against untouchables has a long history, but it takes the form of massacres from the 1980s onward. Karamchedu (1985), Neerukonda (1987) and Chunduru (1991) are a testimony to this phenomenon.[22] These are the places where caste power was expressed in the form of episodes of planned violence, mass murder (including burning alive), arson, looting, sexual assault, displacement, destruction of property and the foisting of false cases. In fact, these forms are classified as 'atrocity' by the 1989 SC/ST Act. If caste atrocity is a form of violence designed to show the slave his 'right place' in society, it is the slave's desire for 'self-respect' that takes the form of a movement and results in the rise of the 'dalit'. In the poem cited earlier, the protagonist (Kotesu) is the one who is burnt alive in public and he is also the newly born 'dalit' who speaks for the community of the untouchable castes.

Differences in basic perspective between dalits and others 'sympathetic' to the cause have also emerged. Dalit groups viewed the Karamchedu killings as a caste atrocity perpetrated by the kammas. Marxist–Leninist (ML) parties, who were active in the area, initially conceptualized the massacre as an attack on agricultural labourers by the landlords.[23] This conceptual tension between the ML parties and dalit groups continues and is unresolved even today. Sikhamani's poem, 'Pardon', translated for this volume, presents it sharply. The poem is also a critique of poetry inspired by ML ideas, commonly referred to as revolutionary poetry, dominant in Telugu in the 1970s and '80s. Sikhamani highlights the failure of the revolutionary poet, whom he marks out as a brahmin, to represent 'caste killings', such as those of Karamchedu, Chunduru and Neerukonda. The international (i.e., Marxist) outlook of the revolutionary poet results in a mentality that can only present the American war against Vietnam, the student struggle at Tiananmen Square in China, or hunger in Somalia. It cannot and does not write of life in the 'malapalle' or the massacre of dalits.

Karamchedu was a historic turning point and the beginning of a self-conscious *dalit* movement in coastal Andhra. The event motivated the scheduled castes to form an organization to defend their dignity, life and property. A small but significant section of intellectuals, educated youth, employees and the activists from the mala, madiga and other untouchable castes established the Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha (DMS) in 1985. The organization self-consciously located itself outside *all* political parties. The caste-specific identity of dalits, the new ideological and political orientation and the form of a mass organization, are all significant aspects of this initiative. The activism of the untouchables in the colonial period and the early days after Independence was limited to petitions, appeals, meetings and protests demanding social reform, education and employment. Post-Karamchedu, the dalit movement brought new demands and issues to the fore. It called for the arrest and exemplary punishment of the upper-caste culprits, criticized the complicity of the state and its agencies in the atrocities and drew attention to the marginal status of dalits in society as well as in the polity. They employed new forms of mobilization—rasta roko, rail roko, demonstrations and public meetings—and worked at the village, district, state and national levels. From requests and appeals for social welfare, the thrust of the discussion shifted to the question of the social and political status of the untouchable community. K. Srinivas, literary critic and editor of a leading Telugu daily, observed in an interview with us: 'The understanding that emerged from Karamchedu was altogether new. My colleagues who went to cover the massacre returned saying "kammas killed madigas". Suddenly, we, who had never considered it important, were hearing the language of *caste* and forced to acknowledge its reality in the attacks. These ideas were very strange and at that time they seemed problematic. A new reality was confronting our values and our ways of thinking' (interview, 5 February 2011). In fact, Karamchedu precipitated a major change in the terms and the idiom of political thinking.

The new organization, DMS, reflected the broad unity of dalits (both activists and leaders) from different ideological orientations. Several dalit social and cultural forums were set up to intervene in the public sphere and advance the dalit viewpoint. Activists from Ambedkarite organizations, Marxist organizations, caste associations, civil rights groups as well as a large number of independent dalit youth came together in the DMS. The two founding members and leaders of the movement, Bojja Tharakam (first president of DMS) and Katti Padma Rao (first general secretary), represent the two main ideological strands in the movement. Both are poets and writers. Tharakam began his career as an advocate in the 1960s and worked with the Ambedkar Yuvajana Sangham and the Marxist–Leninist-oriented Raitu Coolie Sangham in Telangana in the 1960s and 1970s. He brought with him a long experience of fighting the cases of dalits and beedi workers. He was associated with the civil rights organization, Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC), as well as the revolutionary writers'

forum, VIRASAM.[24] Tharakam resigned from the post of public prosecutor in the Andhra Pradesh High Court as a protest against the Karamchedu killings. Padma Rao was a lecturer of Sanskrit in a college in Ponnuru, Guntur district. He had been active in the atheist and rationalist movements since the 1970s and was reputed for his oratorical skills. He had also worked as vice-president and general secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Rationalist Association and edited the journal *Hetuvadam*. After Karamchedu, he turned to the dalit movement, giving it his full attention.

The political significance of Karamchedu is enormous. When the massacre was initially reported by the newspapers and documented by civil rights groups and the Left intelligentsia, the term 'harijan' was used—as in, 'atrocities on harijans', 'the landlords attacked harijans', etc. 'Harijan', literally children of God, was a term used and popularized by Gandhi during the Independence movement. Mainstream Indian society continued to refer to untouchables as harijans. Ambedkar himself had taken objection to the term in the 1930s for its patronizing connotation. Again, in the 1960s and '70s, the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra rejected 'harijan' and widely popularized 'dalit'. Also in the 1970s, N. Basavalingappa and subsequently the DSS in Karnataka put forth a critique of upper-caste reform activism that went under the term 'harijan uplift'. In the context of the Karamchedu massacre too, the untouchable castes denounced the assigned identity 'harijan' and called themselves dalits. This self-naming is a significant move that marked the arrival of a *dalit* subject in the domain of mainstream politics and culture.

Tharakam observed: 'DMS represents dalit confidence that we can fight these battles ourselves.' The 'we' here is a sign that the dalit leadership has arrived. In the campaigns that followed the Karamchedu massacre, it was decided that only dalits would occupy the dais at meetings or address audiences. No upper-caste person, even from the Left and progressive sections known to be sympathetic to the dalits, was allowed to occupy this public space**.** This claim to self-representation is an important move in the development of an autonomous dalit leadership.

In the DMS manifesto, 'dalit' is proposed as a broad and collective identity of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and backward castes. In practice, however, the category remained a specific identity of caste groups that had experienced untouchability and are listed as 'scheduled castes' in the Constitution. After the 1960s, the term 'dalit' began to emerge in different parts of the country as an identity that located social oppression in the brahminical Hindu social system and its culture. Following Phule and Ambedkar, it was argued that dalits were denied human status and dignity and that they had never enjoyed civic status or legal rights. According to modern Hinduism, caste divisions and hierarchies are created by God, and the caste order is therefore divine. The ideas of karma and divine retribution make the mobility of

oppressed castes almost impossible. The idea of 'dalit' breaks with this Hindu identity and offers a new liberating identity. The 'agricultural labourer' of the Left discourse is a class identity and conceives of the untouchables as poor, exploited people, along with others from upper castes and backward castes. The specificity of caste oppression that distinguishes the poor and the untouchables is not captured in the category of agricultural labourer. For example, the struggle against bonded labour is viewed as one against feudal oppression. Minimum wages and land distribution are offered as solutions to this problem. As a result, bonded labour is not viewed as a question that *combines* untouchability, graded inequality and human dignity.

Dalit consciousness strengthened in the cultural arena in the wake of the Karamchedu and Chunduru struggles.[25] The centrality of this 'dalit' identity is the distinguishing feature of dalit literature in the 1990s (Srinivas 1995: 80).[26] The Karamchedu and Chunduru movements, the struggles around reservations (in 1986, to extend backward caste reservations; in 1990, in relation to the Mandal Commission Report and reservations for OBCs) offered the contexts for shaping a distinct dalit identity and for naming the new forms of caste discrimination in the fields of culture and literature. Also, significant debates on feminism and Hindu fundamentalism took place in the 1980s and '90s, as did the reassessment of Marxism that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.[27] Also, around this time, members of the Naxalite-affiliated Left cultural and mass organizations, B.S. Ramulu, U. Sambasiva Rao, Kancha Ilaiah and others, left their organizations to work in the dalit movement. K.G. Satyamurthy—former secretary of People's War—was among those who inaugurated the revolutionary poetry movement in Telugu and wrote under the pseudonym of Sivasagar. He left the underground Naxalite movement and began working in the open with the dalit movement.[28]

The poet Challapalli Swaroopa Rani observed, 'There was literature portraying the theme of caste before Karamchedu happened in 1985. But this literature is reformist both in its form and content. The Karamchedu struggle gave us a series of "resistance poets" (Swaroopa Rani and Suresh 2011: 93).' Nearly a hundred dalit writers, she pointed out, took up pens. That writing continued from the time of the massacre until about 2000 (Ibid.: 95).

Karamchedu brought to the fore not only literary assertion but also a series of related aspects of the caste question: the gross under-representation of SC/STs in the highest public offices and in the leadership of the political parties of the country; the legal recognition of caste; forms of violence associated with caste; the role of caste in the electoral domain, universities and media. This shift in thinking that framed caste as a contemporary question in the domain of democracy opened up a series of other questions.

The very site of the Karamchedu massacre became the site from which the struggle was begun for the equitable sharing of reservations among all SC castes. Krishna Madiga told us when we talked to him that the Madiga Dandora movement started its campaign in 1994 on Karamchedu Martyrs' Day (17 July) in Vijayanagar colony (interview, 9 December 2011). This movement initiated a debate on caste and sub-caste identity among the scheduled castes. Yendluri Sudhakar's poem 'Drum Beat' (Dandora), published in *Padunekkina Pata*, is also a manifesto of the madiga movement in Andhra Pradesh.[29] The debate on sub-caste and its specific identity came to the fore after the Madiga Dandora movement. To address the specific concerns of caste communities and minorities, the dalit literary movement diversified into further movements, such as the madiga literature, Muslimvada literature and backward-caste literary movements. Other significant developments include the question of dalit feminism and also of Telangana regional identity in dalit literature. For example, some dalit woman writers and activists criticized feminism in Andhra Pradesh, terming it coastal Andhra–dominated and upper caste. They established 'Mattipoolu' (Earth Flowers) in March 2009 with the aim of discussing oppressed caste women's experience and their representation in the public sphere.

Ideological and Philosophical Lineages

I

'Ambedkar is an identity icon and in spirit his significance is easy to grasp. But his writings are scholarly, legal, difficult to read … The writing is cerebral; but his existence, and its iconic value, is a matter of the heart,' Devanoora Mahadeva observed (interview, 25 March 2011). 'However,' he soon added, 'Socialists, communists, Periyarites and Gandhians all came together in the DSS.'

These varied ideological legacies make the dalit movement in Karnataka somewhat different from those that emerged in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala—all of which were principally shaped by an Ambedkarite ideology.[30] Influenced by the socialist thinker Ram Manohar Lohia, who integrated Marxian and Gandhian ideas to shape a socialism suited to India, Mahadeva regards this mixed ideological inheritance as positive. 'The contemporary predicament of dalits requires them to seek many ways of liberation, including Gandhi,' he argued in an anguished essay written after he had defied a DSS call to boycott the film *Gandhi* because Ambedkar did not figure in it (Gowda 2010: 80).

The Lohiaite leanings of dalit writers and activists might be traced to the presence of a strong Lohiaite group in Mysore, which included the rationalist and leader of the Farmers' Movement, M.D. Nanjundaswamy (1936– 2004), and the writers K.P.

Poornachandra Tejaswi (1938–2007), U.R. Ananthamurthy and G.H. Naik as well as a number of others. Devanoora Mahadeva, B. Krishnappa, H. Govindaiah, Indudhara Honnapura were all associated with the socialist youth organization, Samajwadi Yuvajana Sabha (SYS), which was active from the mid-1960s. Mahadeva continued his association with Lohiaite thinking through organizations such as Jayaprakash Narayan's Nava Nirmana Samiti in the 1970s and Sarvodaya Karnataka, a party set up to forge a coalition between farmers and dalits in 2005. Krishnappa, then working as a lecturer in Bhadravathi, also had strong intellectual ties with Lohiaites in the neighbouring town of Shimoga. He led protests against the Sanskrit programmes being aired by All India Radio, tried to stop the practice of nude worship in the temple at Chandragutti, and actively promoted inter-caste marriages.[31] At a time when no other political group was discussing caste, the Lohiaite discussions and campaigns attracted dalit youth to the SYS. Indudhara Honnapura recalled: 'I attended a Jati Vinasa Sammelana [a conference on caste annihilation] organized jointly by SYS and Vicharavadigala Sangha and listened to the lectures of Mahadeva, Nanjundaswamy, Poornachandra Tejaswi, K. Ramadas and others. This meeting broke all my inhibitions, instilled enormous energy in me and gave me social support. I got involved in their campaigns against untouchability, injustice and exploitation' (interview, 23 March 2011). Lohia's thought, including his critique of English (*angrezi hatao*) and his openness to Gandhi, influenced and shaped both the farmers' movement and the dalit movement in the 1970s (Gowda 2010: 81–82).

Lohia's understanding of the caste order assumes significance in this context.[32] He viewed the caste order, not as law or religious orthodoxy, but as a system that legitimates caste hierarchies, creates consent and thus ensures the *moral subordination* of the untouchables. Like Gandhi, his critique of caste is primarily a critique of Hindu society as a whole and is focused on its ethical corruption, though he is undoubtedly also concerned with the subordination of untouchables. But, unlike Gandhi, who argued for the uplift of harijans, but did not oppose the caste order, and did not think it necessary for state policy to be concerned with these matters, and like Ambedkar, Lohia called for the dismantling of caste, which he said was the root of the moral rot in Hindu society. Also, unlike Gandhi, he strongly supported the idea of state initiatives and policies (reservations and political representation) to undermine caste. However, unlike Ambedkar (and the Marxists), who stood for principled political action, Lohia stressed creativity, an openness to complexity, critiques from within, non-violence, even reconciliation. What is more, he did not believe that the downfall of caste would be brought about principally by dalits. He stood for an alliance of all victims of caste society, among them the backward classes, upper-caste poor and Muslims.

Lohiaite thought probably appealed so strongly to dalit activists because it called for a critique from within. In other words, there was room here for initiatives that valued the lived knowledge of caste practice and were contextually evolved. Dalits would

have understood the importance of his enthusiastic support of reservations and other welfare measures, and appreciated his stress on inter-caste marriage. These Lohiaite and, as we shall see, also the Marxist, tendencies brought dalits and non-dalits together in the DSS. Unlike many other dalit organizations that found it necessary to organize independently, the DSS was never exclusively dalit. Avoiding caste conflict, they directed their activism at the state and took up issues of all victims of the caste order as well as public issues of a general kind.

Devanoora Mahadeva, a key leader of the DSS, is a complex figure who embodies this difficult ideological convergence of Lohia, Ambedkar and—largely via Lohia—Gandhi. Mahadeva was instrumental in the early DSS days in procuring a copy of the *Dalit Panthers Manifesto*, getting it translated and circulating it. The Dalit Panthers drew the term 'dalit' from Ambedkar and were vocal about his influence on their literature and politics. The *Manifesto* included a fulsome critique of Gandhi who, they wrote, 'was an orthodox casteist and one who gave shelter to those who wanted to preserve class rule' (Joshi 1986: 143). 'Panther' on the other hand was a reference to the Black Panthers whose political lineage was Maoist (or Marxist–Leninist) as well as Ambedkarite.

Mahadeva's early stories are brilliant and tender depictions of the life of a rural dalit community, the problems of exploitation and survival that it faces, the changes that it confronts. 'Dalit' comes across in these stories as an experience, a cultural and philosophical way of life and a lived knowledge of injustice rather than a contemporary politics. The short novel *Odalala* is, among other things, about the incapacity of those who have never experienced the 'innards of hunger' to discern the workings of the world of the hungry, or have their sensibility. The gap is complex and represented with humour, pathos and dazzling metaphoric expression, as is life in the holekeri. The police, who cannot understand how the stolen bag of peanuts could have simply disappeared, are of little use to the old woman who complains to these keepers of the law about the theft of her rooster (which they have actually cooked and eaten). Critics suggest that the complex and symbolic later work, *Kusumabale,* represents a 'significant shift from a dalit-centred vision to a grasp of the life of society as a whole' (Amur: 1963, 2001). We would add that this 'vision of society as a whole' is also, and importantly, a dalit centred vision. And this is a vision that is more Lohia than Ambedkar. Claiming to represent all the oppressed, the Panthers had also written: 'We must understand that the caste nature of the term 'dalit' is breaking down' (Joshi 1986: 142).

Although Mahadeva clearly does not accept Gandhi's 'harijan' idea, and comes to Gandhi through Lohia, according to Chandan Gowda, he, more than anyone else, is responsible for 'tempering the hostility of dalit activists in the state towards Mahatma

Gandhi'. The story of Mahadeva defying the DSS boycott of Attenborough's film and then writing a critical appreciation of the film is part of the mythology of the DSS. 'After watching the film, he agonized for days whether he would have sided with Gandhi or Ambedkar if he had lived during their time. He decided that he would probably have been on Gandhi's side, while arguing with him on behalf of Ambedkar …' (Gowda 2010: 80).

Among the dalit Kannada writers, it is Siddalingaiah who represents the Marxist face of the DSS. He was associated with the Vicharavadigala Vedike (Rationalist Association) and influenced by ideas of the non-brahmin thinker from Tamil Nadu, Periyar, in the early 1970s. As a student living in the social welfare hostel in Bangalore, Siddalingaiah also played a leading role in the boosa agitation. He told us that he became a Marxist 'after boosa', initially joining the CPI and later the CPI (M). It was Siddalingaiah who coordinated the Left and dalit forces in the DSS and achieved appreciable success in doing so. His rationalist ideas and class viewpoint shaped his songs and plays in this phase. Major agitations in Kolar as well as the land struggles in Hassan and Gauribidanur were informed by a class perspective. DSS leaders and activists in some districts, notably Kolar and Gulbarga, came with a Marxist orientation, as did a number of the non-dalit leaders and activists who became involved in DSS work. Siddalingaiah's altogether fresh, rousing and memorable songs were usually composed for singing at mass rallies and meetings. They brought the rhythms, language and sensibilities of ordinary people into the public sphere and raised controversy in the Kannada literary world. They were the heraldic devices of the DSS.

Another important influence was the Naxalite movement, then at its height in the 1970s in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, and the literature that emerged from it. K. Ramaiah, an important DSS poet, thinker and cultural activist, told us that the songs of resistance and struggle from the Left movement in Andhra Pradesh, particularly those by Gaddar, inspired him and others. DSS activists often adapted and used this literature in their own campaigns. In northern Karnataka, Pichchalli Srinivas emerged as a popular singer and performer who was influenced by Gaddar and his electrifying performative style. It was not incidental that Sri Sri, a famous Telugu revolutionary poet, was chosen to inaugurate the Bandaya (Rebel Literature) movement, in which Left and dalit groups came together in 1979. Siddalingaiah, K. Ramaiah, Channanna Walikar and B. Puttaiah, among others, acknowledge the Left ideological influence in their writings.

In a state where there was no strong established tradition of mass movements, DSS was critical in transforming the now famous Samudaya Theatre Company into a popular cultural movement.[33] Samudaya was an initiative taken by Left-oriented theatre activists, writers, poets and artists in the 1970s.[34] They developed a theatre practice that used a workshop mode to focus on contemporary issues relating to bonded labour,

untouchability, corruption in the political order and feudal culture more generally. Siddalingaiah's *Belchi*, *Panchama* and *May Day* were directed by the acclaimed theatre personality C.G. Krishnamurthy in popular Samudaya performances. During the Emergency (1975–77) Samudaya turned out to be the cultural forum that could voice the concerns of movements such as the DSS, the Bandaya literary movement and the radical farmers' movement.

Given the strong influence of the Lohiaite and Left movements, Ambedkar did not emerge as a key influence in Karnataka. In an essay translated for this volume, Aravind Malagatti argues that Kannada writers on the whole (dalit and non-dalit) are reluctant to acknowledge Ambedkar's influence even when their portrayal of dalit life and problems draws on his thought. Bandaya writers, Malagatti told us, used to write about the dalit revolt in terms of class struggle, though later they did incorporate an Ambedkarite analysis (interview, 25 April 2011). However, it was in the Bandaya movement, critic Banjagere Jayaprakash says, that M.N. Javaraiah, Malluru Nagaraju, Aravind Malagatti and others began to read Ambedkar and use his ideas in their writings. As noted earlier, another source of Ambedkarite influence was the Dalit Panther movement, which was a major inspiration for the DSS. A number of early DSS activists spoke about how, after the boosa experience, they began reading Ambedkar, whose writings were available in Kannada translation well before the official translations began appearing in the 1990s. Others noted the strong presence of Lohiaite and Marxist strands in DSS, and pointed out that Ambedkar remained largely a symbolic presence both in the DSS and in the dalit literary movement till the 1990s. In his study of Lohia's influence in Karnataka, and basing his observations on interviews with major dalit writers, Chandan Gowda (2010: 82) notes, 'Ambedkar became more important than any other thinker–activist for them in building an independent dalit movement. The earlier association with Lohia's thoughts encouraged them to make an ethical space for the marginalized sections among non-dalits.' There is, however, little disagreement that it is with the arrival of the BSP in the 1990s that a strong and primarily Ambedkarite strand appears in the dalit movement in Karnataka.

'It was the BSP who introduced the real face of Ambedkar in Karnataka. BSP activists are pucca Ambedkarites,' said Mahesh, state convenor of the BSP (interview, 16 October 2012). In the early years, DSS ideology was 'Gandhi, Lohia, Marx, Ambedkar all mixed up. The DSS did not really know who Ambedkar is and what he stood for. For them, Ambedkar was only an emotional symbol. As a result, DSS activity was largely reactive. It did not have clear objectives, identified pathways or explicit ideology,' he added. The BSP was launched in Karnataka in 1994. Initially, most dalit leaders joined the BSP, but many of them, B. Krishnappa being a notable exception, soon left. The BSP and its students wing conducted classes in which they encouraged reading the original works of Ambedkar very closely. It renamed Republic Day (26

January) as Constitution Day (Samvidhana Dinacharane) and conducted well-attended debates on the Constitution on this occasion. The significance of Ambedkar and his contribution were assessed and highlighted. B. Shivanna of the Bahujan Vidyarthi Sangha told us that they 'organized discussions on food culture and beef eating, conducted tuitions in English and science for dalit students, and celebrated Periyar day and Ambedkar Jayanti to develop an alternative culture' (interview, 12 February 2011). Referring to the DSS workshops and political classes, Mahesh argues: 'In the DSS phase, the influential teachers were from the upper castes. They were Gandhian, Marxist or socialist [Lohiaite]. No one had actually read Ambedkar. Gandhism and socialism were taught. This is an upper-caste strategy. Their real interest was to scuttle the dalit movement. There was no class scheduled on Ambedkar. The organizers used to put up a photo of Ambedkar and light a lamp before it.'

In the BSP's reading, Ambedkar emphasizes the importance of political power and participation in electoral politics. The DSS focused their campaigns on fighting social discrimination—untouchability, bonded labour, atrocities—and struggled for economic rights such as minimum wages and distribution of government land. In the BSP's view, the limitation of the dalit movement and other dalit initiatives (such as K. Ramaiah's cultural school, Adima) was that they worked only on the social and cultural problems of dalits.

II

Dalit activists in Andhra Pradesh emerge principally out of three formations: Christianity, rationalist movements and ML activism. However, B.R. Ambedkar is the key ideological figure that inspired, shaped and informed the DMS as well as the dalit literary movement in Andhra Pradesh. In the mid-1980s, the Dalit Mahasabha brought together dalit activists and intellectuals from diverse political ideologies, while representing itself as an Ambedkarite organization. The DMS's manifesto reads: 'During the freedom struggle, Dr B.R. Ambedkar honestly fought for dalits and underlined the need for a social movement. He produced a social history for dalits after thorough research into the depths of the history of untouchables. Today, when we are building a dalit movement, his research as well as the entire history of his struggles for the oppressed people, will serve as a guiding spirit' (Sambasivarao 2005: 13). It has already been noted that the DMS attracted its activists and leaders from the Ambedkarite youth organizations, SC/ST employees' associations, rationalist associations as well as from Marxist-oriented organizations. It also included dalits who earlier had no political affiliations. Initially however, the professed Ambedkarite position in the manifesto was only academic and strategically adopted in the context of the diverse ideologies of DMS members. The ideological contradictions between the

Marxist and Ambedkarite or non-Marxist members of the DMS can be found in the text of the manifesto as well as the later practice of DMS. 'The DMS manifesto spelt out a nuanced position, which tried to blend the questions of caste and class,' K. Srinivasulu (2002: 54) writes. He cites a passage in the manifesto: 'If the dalit movement has a caste[ist] perspective, instead of doing well, it would in fact do harm. Such a social revolution movement would end up inciting casteism. In the process of resolving social contradictions, we must formulate a class perspective; those who want to destroy caste cannot hang on to caste. To annihilate caste, the existence of caste should only be recognized' (Ibid.). After the inception of DMS, these debates between Ambedkarite and Marxist activists continued for more than two decades, both inside the organization and in the Telugu public sphere.[35] However, as the dalit movement increased its activity and spread its base, Ambedkarism emerged as its principal ideological direction. We will map this debate and indicate how Ambedkarite thought shaped the dalit literary movement in Telugu.

The 1990s gave rise to a number of studies that revisited the history of the dalit movement in Telugu-speaking regions. One of the important reasons for the emergence of Ambedkarism as an ideological force in the DMS could be the circulation of Ambedkar's ideas as early as the 1930s and the establishment of Ambedkar youth organizations in the 1960s and '70s in Andhra Pradesh.[36] Ambedkar's announcement in 1935 that he would convert from Hinduism sparked a lot of political activity all over India (Omvedt 1994: 289). Dalit leaders in the then state of Hyderabad had made contact with Ambedkar in the 1930s and were continually in touch with him. They attended the Untouchable Youth conference in 1936 in Poona and later formed the Youth League of Ambedkarites. B.S. Venkatrao (1890–1953), popularly known as 'Hyderabadi Ambedkar', was elected its president and another educated youth, Venktaswami, as secretary. Those who were active in the adi-andhra movement in coastal Andhra also turned their attention to Ambedkar after his conversion announcement. Kusuma Dharmanna, an important leader of the adiandhra movement and a dalit himself, initiated several activities and found support among other activists. Dharmanna, who had been close to the Gandhians, now emerged as a representative of the Ambedkarite group.[37] This first-wave Ambedkarite movement faded after the 1940s.

In the second phase, Ambedkarite thought finds expression in the translation of his ideas and also the formation of Ambedkar youth organizations. Bojja Tharakam, one of the founders of DMS, told us how Ambedkar and the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra were influential in the struggles of the 1960s and '70s in Telangana's Nizamabad district. He recollected: 'We formed the Ambedkar Yuvajana Sangham, a district-level organization with branches in many villages.' It was a new and energizing experience for dalits to have their own organization and meetings that were only for them. Katti Padma Rao, another founder of DMS, began reading Ambedkar in the early

1970s to speak at the Ambedkar Jayanti meetings. He also read Dhananjay Keer's biography of Ambedkar in English and Endluri Chinnaiah's biography of Ambedkar in Telugu.[38] In the process, he told us, his personality underwent a change from 'a Christian personality to an Ambedkarite personality' (interview, 10 April 2011). He absorbed Ambedkar's philosophy of caste annihilation, and continues to practise the five principles he laid down: writing, reading, building institutions, setting up libraries and practising what is advocated.

The third phase for the reappearance of Ambedkarite thought was in the 1980s and '90s. In the context of dalit massacres, dalit activists felt the need to form a state-level organization that would bring together dalit forums and dalit forces from other ideological streams. Karamchedu was a key event with regard to this consolidation. By the 1990s, the dalit movement had spread its activity to several areas of the state, but the atrocities continued unabated. It is in the 1990s, as the dalit movement grew stronger, that Ambedkar returns to the centre stage of dalit politics in a spectacular manner. Protests against atrocities necessitated the formation of autonomous dalit organizations at the regional level. At the national level, the Mandal movement (1990), the Dr B.R. Ambedkar Birth Centenary celebrations (1991), the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent disarray of Marxism, all contributed to this resurgence of Ambedkar. When the decision was taken to implement the Mandal Commission recommendations on reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in education and employment, upper-caste students opposed the policy and led a violent nationwide agitation. The agitation and its campaign targeted not only the proposed policy but also the very idea of reservations and the relevance of caste as a dimension of discrimination in modern India. Though initially taken by surprise, dalits managed to build a powerful and lasting counter-campaign and consolidated various regional dalit movements into a pan-Indian dalit movement in the 1990s. It is not a coincidence that the central government also decided during this time to celebrate Dr B.R. Ambedkar's birth centenary in 1991. These larger changes contributed to the setting up of Ambedkar as a national icon and the widespread recognition of the centrality of caste in Indian society. The Chunduru carnage (1991) in Andhra Pradesh precipitated a huge mobilization of dalits and other progressive forces (particularly ML organizations).[39] The debate on Ambedkar, the anti-caste tradition and the role of caste took a new turn in the regional context. Dalit intellectual groups challenged the sincerity of Marxist organizations, which had championed the cause of the dalits for several decades, and this generated a productive discussion in the literary and political spheres.

Bojja Tharakam (1996) sums up the dalit criticism of Marxism in his *Kulam–Vargam* (Caste and Class). Basing his reflections on his experience of activism in the 1970s, he examines the contradiction between the Ambedkarite and Marxist perspectives. He argues that the communists assumed that untouchability and caste will dissolve as soon

as the feudal system is destroyed. But the communist parties has no actual programme for caste annihilation (p. 63). He further points out that the two significant movements, the Telangana peasant movement of the 1940s, and the Srikakulam movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, under the leadership of the communists and their cultural movement, did not take up the issues of untouchability or caste. Communist parties have always supported the untouchable and backward castes, who provided them shelter, faced repression for their involvement in the movement and too often sacrificed their lives for it. However, the communist movement and its leadership remained in the hands of the upper castes who did not challenge the dominance of their own castes in the movement or outside it. Though some leaders recognized the importance of caste annihilation as individuals, they did not translate it into a programme (Ibid.: 77–78).

The life and career of Sivasagar, a Telugu revolutionary poet and a former leader in the ML movement, is an example of the limitations of a Marxist perspective and the significance of the Ambedkarite dalit movement in the 1990s.[40] Sivasagar acknowledges that, in his long career from 1948 to 1990, he did not develop an understanding of caste as a result of his Left politics, because of which he believed caste would automatically disappear after the revolution. In the 1990s, this established and highly regarded poet reinvented himself as a dalit activist–poet, read Ambedkar and played an important role in the dalit movement until his death in 2012. In fact, Sivasagar's trajectory is not exceptional. The dalit writers Bojja Tharakam, Satish Chandar, Kalekuri Prasad, Krishna Madiga, Krupakar Madiga and Gogu Shyamala, all featured in this volume, began their political careers in Andhra Pradesh's ML movements.

Two dalit proposals illustrate the renewed significance of Ambedkar. One, it was proposed that any literature written from an Ambedkarite perspective is dalit writing, but writing from non-Ambedkarite perspectives cannot be considered dalit writing (Narasaiah 2000). In other words, the long tradition of writing about dalits from a Marxist perspective was rejected as dalit writing in the 1990s. This critical view also compelled Left writers from a dalit background to engage with Ambedkarism and the dalit movement and to produce a new kind of literature. Gaddar, Gorati Venkanna and Kalyana Rao are among those who after Karamchedu created distinct kinds of songs, novels and critical writing about dalit life. The excerpt from G. Kalyana Rao's *Antarani Vasantam*, translated here, is one such example.

Two, Marxist parties and organizations seriously debated the specificity of caste and the relevance of Ambedkarism in their forums. The pressure of the dalit movement was such that the communist parties came out with their assessment of Ambedkar and formed organizations to specially address caste inequality and oppression. Ambedkar now occupies an important theoretical space in the ML and other Left movements.[41]

Dalit movements in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have multiple theoretical legacies. The contest between different ideological viewpoints is thematized in dalit writing. However, the decisive victory of Ambedkarism is a significant development as dalit movements spread and consolidated in the 1990s. There is no denying now that Ambedkarite thought shapes the ideology and distinctive identity of the dalit literary movement.

The Dalit Woman Question

I

Two significant events that took place in the early years of the upsurges documented here give us a sense of the early complexities and impasses around the question of women in these movements, and help us appreciate the originality and depth of the new propositions in the writing by dalit women represented in this collection.

In 1985 and again in 1986, DSS activists around Shimoga and Bhadravathi (with B. Krishnappa in the forefront) along with other groups, notably the women's collective, Manavi, tried to stop the yearly bettale seve (nude worship) in the Chandragutti temple. Generally undertaken in fulfilment of a vow or a request for a boon, the seve involved bathing in the Varada River and then running up—a distance of about five kilometres—to the temple, naked. Those taking part in the ritual were mainly dalit and backward-class women. The reformists were mostly dalit and progressive/rationalist men and upper-caste women who felt that the practice was humiliating to dalits—upper-caste women were never involved in such rituals, they pointed out—and that the state had a responsibility to stop it. The humiliation was aggravated, they said, in the changed circumstances, in which large numbers of voyeuristic outsiders, armed with cameras, arrived to gape at the show. Their opponents, of course, argued that this was a matter of faith and tradition and was undertaken freely. No one was coercing the women.

What took place in 1986 turned out to be something of a fiasco for the dalits, rationalists and feminists. A major intervention had been planned to dissuade the women, and if necessary, to use the force of the state to stop the ritual. But it was the worshippers, no doubt also encouraged by the temple authorities, who forced the reformers to retreat. They turned violent, 'beat up some of the social workers; cameras were broken and policewomen were stripped' (Radhika 2012: 31). The event was debated for months and has been extensively written about. We only want to point here to a situation, typical of the early years of the dalit and feminist movements, in which dalit women, claiming a right to tradition or identity, appear pitted against well-intentioned activists who are dalit men and nondalit women.

Again, in 1995, this time in Andhra Pradesh, we encounter a stalemate of a similar kind. Following the publication of a startling and generally well-received collection of dalit poems, *Nishani* (Thumbprint), the feminist writer-intellectuals and activists Volga, Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran made an intervention in the debate on dalit literature. Clearly stating that they considered the dalit movement and dalit poetry progressive, they argued for the need to strengthen dalit and feminist connections. They objected to the language used in the poems, which they described as the language of the ruling patriarchal classes and insulting to women. It was regrettable that abusive terms referring to women's body parts were being claimed as dalit culture. True, it was an upper-caste culture that had stigmatized these terms, but was it not possible to develop a new language, one that does not humiliate women, to express anger and hatred? Dalit poetry, they said, needed to invent a new and more egalitarian language (Volga et al. 2000: 115–20).

The poets (all men) did not respond positively to the critique. They did not think of themselves as disrespectful of women and felt misunderstood. Readers joined the fray. Some quickly criticized the response as an upper-caste attack on a new movement and its poetry, and described the feminist movement as brahminical and 'Hindu'. Others argued that it was the upper castes who consider the everyday behaviour and ordinary language of dalits as violent or vulgar. It was this politics of language and culture that should be the focus of discussion, not vulgarity. This time it was a face-off between dalits and feminists. The silence of dalit women, and their absence from the world of dalit literature, was palpable (Satyanarayana 2012: 125–32).

II

Women writers, intellectuals and activists feature prominently in the Tamil and Malayalam collections (Dossier I), as well as in the texts from Kannada and Telugu compiled in this Dossier. The names of Bama, Sivakami and Sukirtharani are often among the very first to be mentioned by anyone asked to list significant contemporary dalit writing in Tamil. In Telugu, Gogu Shyamala and Joopaka Subhadra enjoy growing respect as activists and as writers, as do Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, Jajula Gowri and M.M. Vinodini. The adivasi leader, C.K. Janu, is rarely spoken of as a *woman* activist, but as the interview with her so clearly indicates, being a woman is a significant part of her experience. Her interviewer, Rekharaj, is among a small but effective group of dalit women who have made their mark as public intellectuals. In Kannada, the status of Du Saraswathi and B.T. Jahnavi, both of whom began writing in the late 1980s and are widely recognized, also directs our attention to the sad fact that few women writers or thinkers emerge from the earlier, otherwise awe-inspiring Dalit Sangharsh Samiti or the dalit–bandaya contexts of the 1970s and 80s.

Without exception, these writers are critical of existing feminism, which they describe as upper caste in its assumptions about women, its understanding of women's lives and women's issues, its concept of India, and not the least, in its personnel and leadership. Vinodini, who cut her teeth as a critic and writer on the Telugu feminist poetry of the 1980s, observes that it was only after she became involved in the dalit movement in the 1990s that she realized that feminism had dulled her consciousness of being a dalit woman. 'Feminism made me overlook the fact that there was a problem worse than patriarchy: caste.' Questions that were asked by feminists, Vinodini points out, take on a radically different form in the dalit context: 'The issues here are not of attraction, desire and so on, but of hate, of being detested, spat upon. Remember what happened to Bhanwari Devi in Rajasthan? What does it mean, when a person is raped by a man, his son, his son-in-law at the same time? Is the object of this violence simply a *woman*? What is she? Chalam's Rajeswari is a brahmin girl. [Rajeswari is the protagonist of the novel *Maidanam* by the well-known Telugu writer, Chalam (1894–1979), a crusader for women's emancipation.] I feel I don't really know her. [People like me] do not experience her rage and lust. In the context of our lives, the cold war between husband and wife that feminism talks about seems so thin, so empty.' The protagonist of the powerful story by her carried in this collection is a dalit woman who thinks she can forget her caste. P. Sivakami's 1998 *Asiriyar Kurippu* (translated as *Author's Notes*) is also a critical reflection on the secular–feminist ease with which she herself had set up the critique of patriarchy in her 1995 autobiographical novel, *Pazhhayani Kazhidalum* (translated as *The Grip of Change*). Also palpable is Joopaka Subhadra's anger about the assumptions made, even in people's movements, that upper-caste women merit more attention and require different living conditions. She complains that only upper-caste women and their issues receive recognition by the media, by the leaders of movements as well as by 'mainstream' feminists, who simply assume they can speak for dalit women. The wild flowers that bloom and die unappreciated in Challapalli Swaroopa Rani's poem are dalit women—scholars and intellectuals included—who fade and die unappreciated.

Despite this critique however, the mark of feminism is evident both in the grain of the voice and the ideas of these writers and intellectuals. Bama's feisty village women are feminist (without using or knowing the term) in their rebellions and their support for each other. Both Du Saraswathi and Vinodini lay out engrossing questions of body image, 'pure and impure' sexualities, and explore the traumas of growing up as dalit women. Sukirtarani's finely crafted poems are a brave and moving engagement with sexuality that draws on the feminist reclamation of desire and sexual pleasure. B.T. Jahnavi's 'Vyabhichara' (Adultery) was regarded outrageous when it first appeared, more so since it came from a woman writer. One might say that the critique in these works is not so much of feminism, but of a caste-blind elite feminism and its authority.

Dalit feminists claim feminism and look to African-American feminists, Latino and African feminists for inspiration. Rekharaj calls herself an 'unavoidable companion of the feminist movement in Kerala'. She points out, however, that she feels more at home in the dalit movement than among feminists, although she is also unhappy with it. In the dalit movement, she observes: 'There is an appreciation of feminist questions, but also a pervasive assumption that allows it [the dalit movement] to think of "women" as upper caste … patriarchy is taken for granted …'

This conceptual and political connection between feminism and the dalit movement is evident also in the fact that among the many new ideas that the legendary Pondicherry-based little magazine *Nirapirikkai* introduced to its eager and predominantly male readership were those of feminists from across the world. Lovely Stephen's account of the Dalit Women's Society (DWS) in Kurichi near Kottayam records the lectures and discussions that it enabled and the springboard it provided to the group of dalit students who went on to become leading intellectuals and artists of the 1990s and after. T.M. Yesudasan's visionary 'prologue' for dalit studies, included in Dossier I, was first presented at a meeting organized by the DWS. New research being done on important early dalit women leaders, such as Velayudhan Sadalakshmi (a political worker and Andhra Pradesh's minister for endowments in the 1970s) suggests that they trod an imaginative and deeply political path in elaborating and consolidating dalit politics.

In her analysis of the suicide of Rajani—a college student who had secured a 'merit list' admission to a computer science course—Rekharaj points out that banks require surety for loans and since in Kerala the ownership of property is caste-based, dalit students do not get loans. Without the loan, Rajani was unable to pay the professional college's fees. Her experience points to the predicament of dalit students who are 'forced to study outdated courses in government institutions at a time when self-financing colleges are offering courses geared towards … job opportunities.' Rajani, she observes, 'committed suicide because of her inability to continue in the professional course, given the inadequacy of the government stipend and the refusal by banks to provide a loan … In this context there is absolutely no reason for Rajani's sexual life becoming a topic of discussion. However, the equation that a dalit woman is a bad woman, immoral woman, persists on the strength of social prejudice.' Such events, she concludes, require 'closer scrutiny and greater alertness' than existing liberal, Marxist or feminist analyses provide.

The potential of such scrutiny and alertness is evident in Gogu Shyamala's 'Radam' (A Festering Sore), in which she takes up an 'evil' that social reformists have engaged with for over a century—that of women who are 'dedicated' to the temple as devadasi, jogini or basavi and are then considered sexually available to the upper-caste men of

the village. Shyamala tells the story from the point of view of a young dalit girl who discovers, only when her father hurries her out in the middle of the night to catch a bus on which she must escape, that she has been 'selected' to perform this task in the village. They quickly bundle up a few belongings and steal out of the village before the patel gets wind of their plans. She is uprooted and lonely in the social welfare hostel to which he takes her, worried about what will happen to her father in the village, but temporarily safe. He returns to face the landlord's wrath. There is a murderous attack on him and, fearing for his life, he leaves the village. The family loses the small piece of land they owned. Her mother struggles to raise the other children after the father leaves. Shyamala poses the jogini question as one that must be understood in a political geography of caste as described from the madiga quarter. It is a question in which sexuality, land, childhood, schooling, caste violence and family life all come into play. So does the desire for education and escape from a power that is upper caste and patriarchal. The father, who in another story returns from his wanderings, weary and anxious, and suddenly turns violent, accusing his wife of having cheated on him, is her ally here, and the child's too; they pull together in the story of her escape.

Reformist talk (of abolition or eradication of a social evil) rings hollow in this setting. So does its elite moralism. The utopian urge here is for self-determination, for freedom, for the right to refuse and escape, not the need to cleanse or upgrade from tradition into modernity and the monogamous family. Epochal promises—of eradication, legal protection, progress, equality for women—fade in the complex formation and uneasy temporality of this festering sore, but the critical energy and the utopian aspirations of the narrator-protagonist open onto a future that may be without these guarantees, but is worth fighting for—personally.

Similar reformulations that have transformative potential for the feminist understanding of violence within the family, and perhaps to begin a new discussion on the theory of violence itself, may be found in Shyamala's story 'Mother may only be a small basket and Father an elephant, but …',[42] as well as in Anu Ramdas's article 'My Man'.[43] Using the example of the family of migrant dalit construction workers who acquire the coveted (because it comes with the right to put up a residential shelter at the site) position of 'watchman', she writes: 'Only a seasonal migrant labourer knows how precious this offer is, and uncannily so does the contractor. It took me some time before I fully realized this move up almost always involved the sexual exploitation of the watchman's wife and his female relatives by the contractors and their contacts.'

There were frequent family feuds and both husband and wife carried scars of those encounters. Ramdas comments, 'She'd cry when people enquired about her scars, receiving sympathy and advice; he remained coldly silent to similar queries, never letting anyone know his feelings about subjecting his wife to verbal and physical

violence and being the recipient of counter-violence.' The point here is not that both parties are equally guilty of violence. The questions she asks are altogether different: 'This was violence between two individuals—man and woman, husband and wife. Or was it? How much of this domestic violence is linked to the violence that society bequeaths this couple? How much chance do they have of avoiding the many forms of violence including domestic violence, as migrant dalit labourers? … [Between these two], domestic violence was basically about betrayal. Whose betrayal? Hers. She was supposed to mythically avoid sexual exploitation while still ensuring a roof over the family. He was supposed to mythically protect his wife from sexual exploitation while still ensuring a home. Society's. It was expected to mythically not take advantage of chronically disempowered persons, whose labour, bodies and minds it could manipulate at ease.' The analysis, alert as it is to the dense layering of the issue, ends with: 'I knew them as wonderful parents to three children with mutual dreams of a different world for them. Tenderness between this married couple and the children bring back fond and nourishing memories.'

Analysts often write about dalit women's issues as those in which questions of caste and gender 'intersect'. What we find here, however, is not an intersection of issues (caste, gender) that have separate real lives elsewhere (in the dalit movement; in feminism). As these writers wrestle with questions that touch their lives and lay claim to a political subjectivity, issues of land, water, housing, bank loans, education, political leadership, family, domestic violence, sexuality, literature, history, food, play, friendship, laughter, anxiety, fear and a hundred other things come into sometimes uneasy confluence. There is a critical engagement with the Left and even the primarily reformist, Ambedkarite understanding of these questions, as well as with that of feminism in its early days. The frames that these writers propose—say for an understanding of domestic violence, suicide, or sexuality—are more comprehensive than those of what now appears more and more clearly as an upper-caste feminism. We like to think that in the idea that patriarchy is better described analysed as a *caste* patriarchy, as well as in the actual issues these writers and thinkers raise, there is promise for a renewal of the woman's question as well as the dalit question.

New Dalit Worlds

The late 1990s is marked by what have been termed splits and fragmentation of dalit movements. Internal tensions and contradictions between dalit castes among other problems divided the dalit movement into specific caste movements and small forums. The dalit literature of this period is marked by the awakening and assertion of individual untouchable jatis (sub-castes). These 'sub-caste' movements and the new religious and cultural mobilization of jatis brought new questions to the fore. Questions

were raised of structural hierarchy and social inequality among the different scheduled castes as also those of an oppressed caste identity that is rooted in culture and history and strengthened by its own myths and epics.[44] We will first discuss the madiga movements as an example of the 'sub-caste' movements and turn after that to questions of caste as identity and cultural or religious traditions.[45]

The madigas, one of the scheduled castes of Andhra Pradesh, formed the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS) in 1994 to fight for the subdivision of SC reservations as well as the welfare benefits available to SCs. This movement, popularly known as Madiga Dandora movement, is seen as a movement for equality between the oppressed SCs. The madigas had put pressure on the state to pass a legislation subdividing SC reservations into ABCD groups on the basis of their relative inequality —social, educational and cultural—and the percentage of their population among the fifty-nine listed SCs in Andhra Pradesh.[46] Of these, two formerly untouchable communities—mala and madiga—are the largest. Together, these two communities comprise 80 per cent of the state's SC population. The problem of subdivision, therefore, has taken the form of a mala– madiga conflict.

MRPS, under the leadership of Krishna and Krupakar (who changed their names to Krishna Madiga and Krupakar Madiga in the course of the agitation), conducted dharnas, mass rallies, seminars, public meetings, rasta and rail roko, and other campaigns. A cross section of the madiga community, principally government employees, women and girls, as well as madiga writers and artists were among the first to join the movement, but it soon received support from other sectors too—so much so that the Madiga Dandora movement has been described as one of the biggest mass agitations in recent years. MRPS consolidated the madigas as a community and at the same time also sought and received the support of various Left and other democratic organizations, as well as that of mainstream political parties. A solidarity committee (Madiga Dandora Porata Sangheebhava Committee) of different peoples' organizations and individuals was formed with the well-known balladeer Gaddar as its convenor. It extended active support to the MRPS movement.

The immediate issue that came up for debate during the course of this massive mobilization of madigas from 1995 to 1999 is the complaint that a few among the scheduled castes had secured disproportionate benefits from the SC reservations to the detriment of others. In 1996, the Andhra Pradesh government appointed a one-man commission, headed by Justice Ramachandra Raju, to examine this issue. The commission substantially agreed with the complaint voiced by the madigas in its May 1997 report, and the state government accepted the following findings of the commission that same year:

I. There is disproportionate distribution of reservation benefits in favour of the 'mala' and 'adi-andhra' groups of scheduled caste communities compared to their respective populations.

II. Compared to their respective populations, neither the madiga nor the relli groups have been adequately represented in public appointments or in educational institutions.

Justice Raju recommended 'categorising these SC communities into four groups, "A", "B", "C" and "D", on a rational basis.'[47] Soon after, the government issued an order subdividing the SC reservation quota of 15 per cent. Of the fifteen roster points, the lowest sub-castes in the ladder of dalit hierarchy—relli and mehtar—were included in group 'A' and would get 1 per cent, the madigas and related castes categorized as group 'B' would get 7 per cent, the malas and related castes as group 'C' would get 6 per cent, and adi-andhras and related castes as group 'D' would get 1 per cent.

The leadership of the existing dalit organizations opposed the madiga agitation on the grounds that it would divide the dalit masses. As a consequence, it was argued, building agitations for common demands of land and political power would be difficult. The malas argued that the madiga movement was a conspiracy of the state and blamed the Telugu Desam Party for using the issue only to create its own vote bank. They also took recourse to litigation, arguing that the government order of subdivision was illegal and unconstitutional. The institutions of Indian democracy, the high court, the Supreme Court, the state Legislative Assembly, the central government and the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were all brought into this litigation at various stages.

The long-drawn-out struggle of the madigas is well documented in an interview with Krishna Madiga that we carry in this dossier. This is a long story of political claims in the corridors of law and administration. The Andhra Pradesh High Court struck down the government order (hereafter GO), the National Commission for SCs and STs interpreted it as unconstitutional, and the state governor referred the Ordinance to the President of India. Finally, the President approved the Ordinance for the subdivision of SC reservations. With the enactment of the AP Scheduled Castes (Rationalization of Reservations) Act, 2000, categorization of SC reservations was implemented between 1 April 2000 and 5 November 2004. However, when the mala representatives appealed, the Supreme Court set aside the AP Act of 2000 on the grounds that, according to the Constitution, 'scheduled castes' are an indivisible category and any subdivision therefore unconstitutional (Balagopal 2011: 448–63).

It is important to introduce here briefly the fledgling madiga movement in Karnataka, as it has, more recently, taken up a similar movement. The madigas and other 'lower'

dalit castes in Karnataka set up two organizations: Madiga Dandora and Madiga Misalati Horata Samiti (MRHS) in the late 1990s.[48] Inspired by the success of the MRPS agitation in Andhra Pradesh in 1996, and a long debate among the madiga leaders of Marxist orientation, J.B. Raju, S. Mareppa, Prakash Murthy, Ambanna, Danappa and others formed the MRHS. M. Shankarappa and other associates of the DSS leader B. Krishnappa started the Madiga Dandora in 1997. In Karnataka, the madigas are commonly referred to as the 'Left community' and the holeyas as the 'Right community'. A wave of campaigns in the year 2000 and later, demanding the subdivision of SC reservations, resulted in the Karnataka government setting up the Justice A.J. Sadashiva Inquiry Commission in 2004 to examine the issue of disproportionate distribution of reservation benefits to certain castes in the SC list of 101 castes. The Commission recommended reclassification into four groups—Right, Left, Touchables and Other Scheduled Castes—for equitable distribution of the 15 per cent overall reservation: six to the Left community, five to the Right, three to Touchables and one to Other Scheduled Castes, based on the proportion of their populations. The Commission uses the popular categories of Left, Right and Touchable castes, rather than the 'sub-caste' names. The Left refers to madiga and allied castes, the Right to holeya and allied castes, and Touchables refers to bhovi, lambani, korama and koracha castes who are not treated as untouchables by caste-Hindu society. The recommendations are yet to be implemented and madiga organizations continue to agitate for it.

The political form and the achievement of the struggles put in place by the madiga movement are, in many ways, unprecedented. They worked politically, with arguments and information, to bring together madigas and gather the support of others; at the same time, they worked on the government to marshal its support for an equitable sharing of reservations. In the process, the omnibus category of scheduled castes was redefined, the Constitution reinterpreted and the reservation policy reformulated. What is more, the madigas' construction of their self and community and their agenda for democracy, based on the unity of the oppressed castes (as opposed to caste annihilation), opened a new debate on caste politics.

Yendluri Sudhakar's poem 'Drum Beat' (included in this volume) exemplifies this celebratory remaking of madiga self and the imagining of a community based on the idea of equal share and respect to all untouchable castes. Sudhakar speaks as a madiga, not as a dalit now:

I now speak just as I am:
as a madiga, a cobbler,
a slipper-stitching slogger,
a carcass collector, a gravedigger, a scavenger,

these are all me.

These are my people,

and I am speaking about my race.[49]

The striking aspects in the poem are: the new subject, a madiga, and its organic relationship with the community (‘my people’, ‘my race’). This madiga is not ashamed of his caste-ordained occupations and identities; he sees them now as art, as knowledge, as skill. He asserts that the madiga self contains all these occupations and identities (‘these are all me’). The distinction between the dalit victims (who were in fact madigas) of Karamchedu and the madigas of MRPS movement is significant. Sudhakar explains the reasons for ‘the disparity among our own people [dalits]’. He points out: ‘The rungs of the ladder, the masks of insults, inequalities are marks not only of the upper castes’ but also the dalits. He ends by giving the reluctant malas a call to come forward to build ‘a new dalit world’.

The immediate demand of the ‘sub-caste’ movements is to subdivide and ‘share’ reservations and other welfare benefits. But these movements open up larger theoretical questions. We will examine two of them: a revision of the dalit agenda of caste annihilation and the construction of a new discourse of caste.

In the dalit movements of the 1970s and ’80s, ‘dalit’ is proposed as a term for the untouchable castes as a whole. This is a politically significant effort to integrate the untouchables into a single community and mark their difference from caste Hindus. In addition, it held up the ideal of the annihilation of caste-Hindu-imposed identities (such as panchama, chandala, harijan, etc.). As a result, mala, madiga, holeya and so on were also viewed as stigmatized. From the time of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, dalit movements had held up this identity and proposed a programme of caste annihilation to create a democratic society.

The assumption that the caste order is only that which is imposed by caste-Hindu society obscures the well-entrenched caste disparities and discrimination among the dalit castes. Treating all untouchable castes as equal actually reproduces disparities. As the madiga struggle showed, a reservation policy that did not recognize disparities among the SCs of Andhra Pradesh actually reproduced the disparity. Secondly, madigas proposed a revision of the dalit social revolution by valourizing a madiga identity (practices like attaching Madiga as a suffix to the name, and invoking madiga history and culture). Caste annihilation, this indicates, has to be rethought as a project where caste identities may remain as markers of a culture and history, but inequalities and indignities will be eliminated.

In addition, these post-1990s movements add a new dimension—that of cultural identity to the notion of caste. The world of untouchables, once stigmatized and banished from public account, reappears. This is made possible by shifting the discussion from annihilation of caste to equality of castes, and from the equality of individuals to equality of castes. It is the dignity of the madiga caste that will ensure dignity to the individual madiga, his or her identity and culture.[50] Interestingly, this fashioning of a distinct caste identity is part of a struggle for fighting the indignities and inequalities of the caste order. The debates around madiga literature and, more recently, beef, will help us appreciate the complexity of conceptualizing caste as identity.

What was generally known as 'dalit literature', madigas in Andhra Pradesh pointed out, was mala literature.[51] In the early 1990s, when MRPS activists subjected the dalit literary 'canon' to scrutiny, Yendluri Sudhakar turned out to be the only madiga. In 1996, Nagappagari Sunderraju, who is a product of madiga movement, founded the Madiga Sahitya Vedika. He argued that the questions raised by the madiga movement in the context of political representation and reservations are applicable also to the literary and cultural fields. The very next year, Sunderraju compiled a collection of madiga poetry, *Madiga Chaitanyam*. A second collection edited by Krupakar Madiga and Joopaka Subhadra, *Kaitunakala Dandem: Madiga Kavitvam*, appeared in 2008. Both volumes clearly establish the importance of this literature, which not only forges a new identity but also gives dignity and respect to their life and culture. In these representations, caste is invoked as a form of solidarity, culture and knowledge that can be used to fight the stigmatization of the madigas and also to reject the established notion of caste as indignity, inequality and authority.

The beef issue will also help us grasp the politics of caste in 'sub-caste' movements. Food is an important topic in dalit literature. Dalit activists have also debated food culture around the serving and consuming of beef in public. In Karnataka, they protested against a law that banned the sale and consumption beef on Ambedkar Jayanti and threatened to cook and serve it in public on this occasion.[52] The much-publicized beef festival in Osmania continues this engagement.[53] There, dalit, OBC and Left student activists questioned the exclusion of dalit food cultures from hotel menus, restaurants and other public spaces. Eating beef in public was not just an assertion of the right to food or a celebration of India's diverse food cultures. As Sambaiah Gudimeda argues in an article in this volume, 'The suppression of food culture in a modern public space not only reinforces the exclusion and humiliation, but also causes injury to the agency and identity of the madiga community.' Therefore, he suggests that 'it is not enough to accord representation to marginalized cultures. Such representation needs to be accompanied with respect of "the other".' In other words, the beef festivals demand recognition and respect of the identity of the dalit castes. The rise of madiga literature and the struggle for eating beef reformulate caste as a network of solidarity and cultural pride. The

madiga proposal for unification—based on the recognition of identity, in order to fight upper-caste notions of caste as dominance, violence and inequality—makes the debate on caste inequality theoretically complex.

The related question of religious and cultural traditions of the dalit castes assumes significance in the post-1990s period. Dalit scholars and writers have searched out and documented the alternative histories embedded in the mythology of madigas, dakkalis and other dalit castes.[54] Yendluri Sudhakar's *Mallemoggala Godugu* (Narratives of Madiga Life) is a history of madiga ancestors. The story, translated for this volume, talks of their skills with the dappu, which they could play in such a way that it would stop a galloping horse in its tracks by picking up its heartbeat! Vemula Yellaiah argues for a critical appreciation of cultural heritage, and cites the achievement of the *Jambapuranam,* a well-known madiga-origin epic performed or narrated with massive illustrative scrolls. K. Ramaiah's initiatives in the Adima school draw on the various knowledges of the dalit inhabitants of the boulder-strewn hills of Kolar. Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy discusses the important turn to Buddhism, reclaimed as a dalit tradition, among Kannada writers.

A new generation of Kannada dalit writers (Mahadeva Shankanapura, T. Yellappa, Chennappa, Somasekhara Bisalwadi, among others) has rejected the idea of dalit culture as a monolith—unified and seamless.[55] This critical and creative project contests the dominant lingayat culture (which is also vegetarian). Dalit writers have set up a search for cultural elements (lower-caste cults, mythical figures, folk tales, narratives and so on), which were sidelined, distorted, rejected or suppressed by the upper castes and sometimes just assimilated into the dominant culture. New research studies point to a cultural tradition of gods, religious practices, myths and rituals that are of dalit origin and egalitarian in their outlook. These groups have continued to have a substantial following, mostly from the dalits and backward castes. For example, the annual Manteswamy jatras in Kollegal in south Karnataka, their main ritual centre, attract large numbers. These cults attach value and respect to all the condemned practices (eating meat, consuming bhang and other intoxicants, leading an itinerant, possession-free life, etc.). Critic Bajagere Jayaprakash says that to the message of liberation and slogans we associate with dalit literature, these new writers add a rich cultural texture.

In this volume, Mahadeva Shankanapura argues that the Manteswamy and Malemadeshwara cults of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are egalitarian and caste-free, that they belong to Shaivite lineage, and are madiga and holeya respectively. He maintains that oral culture is the site of critical knowledge for constructing a history of dalits. This new writing rejects the assumption that 'the traditional cultural self of dalits' is rooted in the Hindu religious world and, therefore, dalit and caste-Hindu

societies are organically connected (Nagaraj 2010: 222). Dalit investigations into the past posit a subjectivity outside the Hindu fold. K.B. Siddaiah rejects the view that dalit and Hindu societies are interlocked, as well as the idea of a counter or parallel culture. 'In *Gallebani*, I am trying to discover my own unique world—not one that is parallel to the mainstream. It is not just a quest for identity or the search for a counterculture; I draw on my people and my experience to offer a new world, and with it a new vision' (interview, 4 April 2011).

Conclusion

This Dossier documents the complex questions that have been opened up in the context of the new dalit movements. In fact, we find in this Dossier a charting out of the field of contemporary dalit political, social, cultural and spiritual initiatives.

The more visible and highly publicized set of legal and moral questions relate to natural and civil rights, social justice; right to land and resources; claims on public space (the village tank, classroom, cinema hall); undemocratic and inhuman practices such as untouchability; bonded labour; the prevention of atrocities; harsh and humiliating village customs such as nude worship or the designation of a woman as jogini. Altogether new forms of cultural and political assertion have emerged as a result of the demand for the equitable sharing of welfare benefits.

A second set of questions relate to the historical experience of colonial modernity. These emerge around the encounter with liberal humanism, the conversion to Christianity, reconfigured public spaces and new opportunities to make a living. They also raise the question of dalit history given the fact that nationalist accounts of colonialism completely obscure the dalit engagement with colonial modernity. Dalit histories of colonialism highlight the normative enlightenment values that enabled dalits to question the dominant caste-Hindu society and to claim their rights as human beings. All early dalit movements and their leaders were a product of the colonial period.

Beyond legal and moral claims and colonial context, we find also record here of an alternative dalit cultural and social field that draws on experience, everyday life, community living, lived knowledge of the world, myths, ethics and culture. In this field, we encounter new languages, new voices and a renewed engagement with the symbolic, mythical and spiritual world. We have yet to grapple adequately with the significance of this world for dalit life, historical or contemporary.

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PART I

KANNADA

B. Krishnappa

B. Krishnappa was one of the pioneers of both the dalit literary movement and radical dalit politics in Karnataka. He is also one of the founders of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS), which was registered in 1975 in Bhadravathi, where he was working in a college. Devanoora Mahadeva recalled that, for the DSS at that time, the fact that Krishnappa belonged to the 'Left' (madiga) section of dalits, was an additional factor in his nomination as founder president.

Born in 1938, in Guttooru, in Davangere district, he was the eldest in a family with seventeen children. Krishnappa struggled with grinding poverty and untouchability. He cites as critical to his political development three early experiences: his mother being insulted by a brahmin man at a temple she prayed at regularly; a baby sister dying after falling into the kitchen fire and the family being told that it was because they worshipped a Shivalinga in their house (it was forbidden to bring one into a holeya dwelling); and a case filed by the dalit elders against the village tea and coffee stall for serving dalits in coconut shells. Given his academic brilliance, the family hoped he would study medicine but could not afford it, so Krishnappa registered for a BSc degree in Chitradurga, only to give that up too and join the BA course. He did his MA in Kannada from Mysore University.

Krishnappa and the writer Gopalakrishna Adiga were colleagues in the college in Sagar, where he was a lecturer. They left together to join the Sir M. Vishweshwaraiah College in Bhadravathi, where Krishnappa worked for thirty years. He was the principal when he retired voluntarily in 1995. A popular teacher and administrator, Krishnappa played football with his students, taught them local village songs, produced plays and ran a journal, *Bhadra,* that published student writings. He also started the Bada Vidyarthi Nidhi Fund for students in need of financial assistance.

His marriage to Indira, a brahmin student in his college at Bhadravathi, was a radical move and part of his struggle against the caste system. Her family was dead against the relationship and confined her to the house. She wrote to him secretly about her situation and he wrote back to her. S.R. Keshav, author of a short biography that is the source of much of the information in this headnote, quotes from that letter, which in translation reads thus: 'This society is trying to build a wall between us … I have started a youth association of the Samajwadi Party dedicated to a humane society. Among its principles are annihilation of caste, encouragement of inter-caste marriages, etc.... Man must live by swimming against the current … in that lies the spark of his existence … This is a very important stage in our lives and we must be strong at this point. Let's not forget that

our marriage will be a great achievement in this respect. You must decide whether you want to create a revolution by being the wife of a revolutionary person or be slave to tradition and die unnamed … Think of all the great people … think of the Buddha … regular people achieve greatness by doing revolutionary things. I don't seek you out of lust but to become a fierce power through you. To become an empowered revolutionary through this … let's share our joys and sorrows … if we don't have enough to live on, let's die fighting.' They eloped and registered their marriage at Kadooru on 12 May 1974.

Krishnappa was part of a group—which consisted of, among others, Lankesh, Tejaswi, Devanoora and Siddalingaiah, and had H. Govindaiah as publisher—that had started the magazine *Panchama* in 1974 before DSS was set up. The journal documented injustices and atrocities against dalits and is a rich and important record of anti-caste struggles. However, Krishnappa feels that this movement was primarily anti-brahmin—a position which he critiques in his essay on Kuvempu (translated here)—and did not pick up force. The people who actually had the most to gain from annihilating caste lacked leadership and it was DSS that provided that. In 1976, they organized the first dalit writers' convention. It was a historic event. In his talk, Krishnappa said, 'What matters to us is not the aesthetics of poetry, but people. When 60 per cent of the country's population is below the poverty line, if someone claims to write poetry for enjoyment and literary value, we cannot but help but call him a hopeless person.'

S.R. Keshav reports that Krishnappa had envisaged the DSS movement as a non-violent struggle within the democratic framework. Its friends and foes were clearly defined. 'Our fight is against casteists, capitalists and landowners. Advocates of caste, capitalists and landowners are our enemies and those oppressed by caste—agricultural labourers, the landless, poor farmers with small holdings—are our friends.' Even though much of DSS's work in the early months was in the cities and among students, Krishnappa was involved in major land struggles, often succeeding in getting land for the dalits. DSS had coined the slogan 'Government land is *our* land' and also protested against absentee landlordism. They organized a major struggle in Siddalipura (near Bhadravathi), which lasted sixteen months (1975–76). Other initiatives were at Dummihaal (Dharwad) and Bidre (Hassan), both in 1976, Devalapura (Chikkamagaluru) in 1983, Nagasandra (Gouribidanur) in 1985, and Medakinahal (Raichur) in 1986. He also fought for reservations for dalit Christians, temple entry, access to drinking water and hostels for dalit students.

In 1984, he took up the issue of nude worship in Chandragutti near Shimoga. After seeing it, he wrote: '... the opium of faith is so cruel. The priests in this temple are brahmins. While people of all castes have faith in this deity, the ones who participate in the naked procession are all lower castes. With a garland around their necks and one

around their waists and neem leaves in their mouths, they walk the three kilometres from the Warada river to the temple. These underfed naked bodies look like ghosts passing through the forest. Some walk alone, others in twos and some others in bigger groups. Ninety per cent of them are women. I didn't feel that they were doing it of their own free will. In some cases, the coercion was quite clear. I saw a newly married couple where the husband was forcing the wife to do it and she was crying in protest … It was horrifying to see fathers pulling their daughters' saris and sons their mothers'.'

The article he wrote about the practice in *Lankesh Patrike* resulted in an uproar in the Karnataka Assembly. The government agreed to ban it but did not do anything. So in 1986, he formed a group and began a campaign a month before the jatra. His team distributed pamphlets and staged plays. Those who believed in that tradition opposed his ideas and even attacked him physically. Fortunately, he escaped with his life. But the struggle succeeded in securing a ban on the practice.

Speaking about her husband, Indira Krishnappa says: 'We didn't aspire to luxuries … we led a simple, clean and sincere life. Most of his earnings were spent on his travels and other movement-related activities ... He spent very little time with us. Even when he was home, he spent most of his time thinking about his struggle, politics and writing. Dressed in a "monkey cap" and sweater, with a bag slung on his shoulders and a small suitcase, he would set off for his political work with complete disregard to his health or anything at all.'

One important debate that the dalit movement struggled with was that of participation in the elections. Krishnappa initially regarded such efforts as capitulation but later changed his stand and contested elections twice, the first time in 1983 as a candidate of the Janata Party, headed by Ramakrishna Hegde, and the next in 1991, as an independent standing from Kolar. He lost on both occasions. In the mid-1990s, Krishnappa joined the Bahujan Samaj Party and became the only leader from the South to sit on the national committee of that emerging dalit-led party. It saddened him deeply that, in the later period of his activism, the dalit movement was riven by ideological and political fissures. He died in 1997 of a heart attack while attending an Ambedkar birth anniversary celebration in Gadag. Indira Krishnappa now heads the B. Krishnappa Memorial Trust, which is dedicated to furthering the dalit cause.

The two articles included in this book lay out two important arguments of early dalit radical politics in Karnataka. The article on dalit literature (written in 1979) is an index of attempts to blend anti-class and anti-caste agendas, while the critique of Kuvempu's novels shows how dalit literary sensibilities distinguished themselves from a shudra critique of caste dominance and power.

Dalit Literature

Translated by Maithreyi M.R.

Can literary texts about dalits be considered dalit literature? Or is dalit literature necessarily written by dalits? This is the question before us today.

If we are to consider dalit literature as literature about dalits, then Pampa's *Karna*, Harihara's *Madara Chennaiah*, Basavanna's vachanas, Raghavanka's *Holatiyaru Mattu Veerabahu* (Holeya Women and Veerabahu), and in modern literature, Shivarama Karanth's *Chomana Dudi* (Choma's Drum), U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Bharathipura*, Gorur Ramaswamy Iyengar's *Hemavathi*, Kuvempu's *Malegalalli Madumagalu* (The Bride of the Hills) and P. Lankesh's *Sankramana* (Transition) would have to be deemed dalit literature. But just because Pampa has written about a dalit, can he be called a dalit writer? Similarly, how can Harihara, Raghavanka, Basavanna, Karanth, Ananthamurthy, Gorur and Kuvempu be called dalit writers?

What is more, Pampa, Harihara, Karanth and Kuvempu would not aspire to be known as dalit writers. In a 1978 special issue of *Prajavani*, responding to a question about whether literary movements are created only by writers, Karanth says he cannot measure literature through the lens of caste. When caste is such a pulsating reality, one can't but call his response casual. When he is not ready to consider himself a dalit, how can one call his writings dalit literature? It is in this regard that the dalit writers of Maharashtra have rejected the idea that Keshavsut's poem about a mahar boy, S.M. Mati's stories about mahars and, more recently, Jaywant Dalvi's *Chakra* are dalit literature.

Conversely, if a writer is a dalit by birth, is his work necessarily dalit literature? Only recently, with Independence, did dalits win the right to literacy. D.R. Nagaraj cites the vachanas of Madara Chennaiah, composed in the context of the twelfth-century Vachana Movement, as a rare early exception. However, the dalits' feeling of inferiority and a reluctance to admit their identity even post-Independence persists to this today. In 1974, when the first Dalit Sahitya Sammelana was held in Bhadravathi, some gentlemen I wrote to assuming they were dalits did not even respond to my letters. Sri Channanna Walikar, who is now vociferously talking about dalit literature, never came to the Sammelana. He was to preside over the poets' session. In his absence, K.N. Shivatheerthan presided over it. Sri G. Venkatayya, who was to inaugurate our Sammelana, is a very good dalit writer. But can the writings of Banandoor Kempayya and Paramashiva Nadubetta, who had also attended the Sammelana, and Chandrashekar Kambar, whose dalit origins were only recently blown up by the Sahitya Parishat, be called dalit literature? If you ask me, I would say 'no'. I say this because, in their writings, I do not see a commitment to dalit literature. They may be born dalits but they

lack commitment to their identity. Surely then, they cannot aspire to be dalit writers; neither will they make a valuable contribution to the body of dalit literature. Here, I should talk about the exclusion of some African poets from what is thought of as African literature.

Camara Laye is a well-regarded African poet. His *Dark Child* and *Dream of Africa* are well-known writings. In his *Dream of Africa*, he asks black people to stop even their non-violent protests. Though Laye is committed to his blackness, African nationalists term him a colonialist potboiler writer because nowhere in his writings does he protest against British colonialism. So the nationalists are against his inclusion in black literature. In the same way, they are against the inclusion of Amos Tutuola who refuses to remain committed to any position, because they believe that African literature demands certain commitments:

1. Recognizing the oppression of the blacks by the whites, rejecting the assumption that white or red is superior and black inferior, and the slavish attitude that racial prejudice has given rise to;
2. Protesting against colonial and capitalist tendencies;
3. Endorsing Leftist ideology; and
4. Exhibiting pride in the rich culture of Africa, the land of Negritude and of the black people.

In effect, a black writer anywhere in the world must protest against the system that discriminates against people on the basis of colour and subjects them to slavery. Colonial and imperialistic British forces, by occupying Africa, snatched away its freedom. Inevitably, every black writer aspiring to freedom should protest this act. Besides, in a situation where the people have been pushed to dire poverty and must gain economic equality through political philosophy, manifesto and support, a writer who tries to achieve this through his writings will be regarded highly by his people. His experiences as a victim of racial discrimination and imperialism would be a value addition to the corpus of his writings. Instead, if a black poet begins to think like a white person and supports colonialism, it signals his alienation from his African self, despite being born an African. The same is true of a dalit.

India's 5,000-year-old history may be celebrated as glorious and magnificent but concealed within its fringes are some terrible injustices. Its caste system, brahminical and hierocratic, enforced the extradition of entire communities from the village. They were required to live outside the village limits. It deemed them unworthy of touch or sight. It ascribed to them the task of scavenging and of consuming dead cattle. The self-anointed brahmin, at the top of the caste system, exploited people in the name of the gods, the vedas and puranas. He proclaimed that only he had the right to learning. So,

for the last 5,000 years, unaware of their real self, the hard-working shudras and the dirt-cleaning dalits have lived in the dark, ignorant of learning, like animals. Whoever calls this history great must be treated with molten lead.

The dalit literature I mentioned earlier may be small in quantity, but is superior in quality. However, there are some who say, 'They only scream "Ikkrala, Vadirla"[1], is that literature?'

Dalit literature has a different stand on creativity and literary excellence. It is inappropriate to look for refinement in a movement's revolutionary literature. That kind of art can only be found in a literature written in luxury. Refinement cannot be the mainstay of a literature that has revolution and change as its goals.

The purpose of literature that is part of a revolution and has the common people as its focus will have to be different. As dalit literature is addressed more to the labourer, the farm hand toiling in the fields, the unfortunate living in hell, suppressed by the caste system, it has to be unadorned and fresh.

When the purpose is to provoke people against injustice, there is no scope for old aesthetic pleasures or artistic creativity or, indeed, abstruse similes and metaphors. Dalit literature is not the literature of those whose stomachs are full.

Progressive literature is only one wave in dalit literature. By itself, it cannot be revolutionary literature. On the other hand, there is little difference between dalit literature and revolutionary literature. The purpose of dalit literature is to prepare people for revolution. This being the case, any literature that is communal, religious or pro-capitalist will automatically be anti-dalit. Not just that, literature that makes enough noise about the poor and the suppressed, but fails to recognize caste, religion and class as vehicles of exploitation, will also be anti-dalit. Writing is a challenging task for those who are actively immersed in revolution or protest. The extent to which they will take on this challenge will determine the quality of their work. The work of a writer who takes no part in such movements may acquire fame merely by the quantity of output but quality-wise, it can only be regarded as boosa. Some time ago, I had agreed to attend the Dharmasthala Sahitya Sammelana with the intention of putting forward these views. It was not yet clear then whether the Bandaya Sahitya Sammelana would be held separately. But when it became clear that holding a separate meeting had become inevitable, I was clear that I would attend the Bandaya meeting rather than a boosa revolutionaries' forum, like the Dharmasthala Sahitya Sammelana. I felt it was my duty to reject the latter's invitation. It is indeed unfortunate that, despite this, the president of the Dharmasthala Sahitya Sammelana wrote again, pressing me to participate in the event.

Literature produced by the satiated and the flabby, who consume antacids to digest their food, who live in multi-storey buildings and commute only by car and airplane, has

no appeal for me. For such people, literature is an aesthetic luxury, written to kill time. Protest literature is not written for this Tata–Birla 5 per cent who lead a lavish life.

Our engagement today is with the starving, the helpless, those who eat from the waste bins outside hotels, the homeless who live in railway stations and bus stands, those who steal food and clothing and die without a history. Aesthetics is not primary for us. When over 60 per cent of our population live below the poverty line, shedding their blood in fields and factories and rotting in ignorance, anyone who says that he writes for aesthetic pleasure, or for literary values, can only be called irresponsible.

That we have produced such irresponsible literature for the last fifty years is indeed surprising. Poetry, instead of being realistic (objective), became simply imaginative (subjective). With people writing in the subjective mode, having no fixed positions or commitments, the genre acquired a cynical quality. For some it became spiritual; it gnawed others who were overwhelmed by a sense of being orphaned. To my knowledge, no Kannada writer has dwelt on the real problems of this country—the caste system that made life in India gruesomely cruel and kept one-fourth, rather half, of the population outside the village limits, suppressed them and exploited them physically and culturally. Caste plays an important role even to this day. Be it elections or political office, caste is a living force, eating its way into human lives like termites.

Dalit Life Portraits in Kuvempu's Novels

Translated by Maithreyi M.R.

Kuvempu [Kuppalli Venkatappa Puttappa] is one of the most important Kannada writers. No other Kannada litterateur was able to accomplish as much or garner such fame as Kuvempu did in his lifetime. The reason is perhaps that, the greatness of his works apart, Kuvempu also represented the entire shudra community in his protests against brahminism, which had spread its roots far and wide into Karnataka during his time. Thus he stood as a beacon of hope for shudra writers, and there are many examples that may be used to illustrate the point.

When Kuvempu wrote the play *Sudra Tapasvi* (1944), several brahmin writers, including Masti [Venkatesh Iyengar] and DVG [D.V. Gundappa] attacked him for altering the established telling of a purana. Kuvempu's response was apt. He continued to protest against brahminical dominance by employing mythological material in his novels and poems—as if to say that his right to the myths is no less than that of the brahmins. He also uses a style and language that is appropriate to that content. Indeed, so Sanskritized is his language that, in novels like *Kaanuru Subbamma Heggadathi*

(Subbamma, the Landlady of Kaanuru) and *Malegalalli Madumagalu* (The Bride of the Hills), sometimes even small details in the dialogue are incomprehensible to a common reader. Even short descriptive passages are Sanskritized. Ask Kuvempu about it and his reply would be unambiguous: a shudra writer's very use of such language challenges the dominant brahminical style and language of that period. Though his novels do not use a vernacular mode in the narration, this failing seems unimportant when we consider the richness of his works as a whole. Those who criticize Kuvempu's language should remember what he was trying to achieve—though, in his eagerness to challenge the bases of brahminical poetics, Kuvempu lost out on the possibilities offered by vernacular forms. What is more, in his zest to take on a brahminical poet like D.R. Bendre whose ability to bring the desi-ness of the shudra language into his poetry is remarkable, Kuvempu failed to include the dalits who are lower in rank to the shudras [or make artistic use of their language]. As a result, a writer who protested against exploitation unwittingly embraced that oppression elsewhere.

A number of critical writings on Kuvempu's works such as *Gangotri* and *Sahyadri*, have appeared. But we are yet to come across critiques that are empathetic in addition to being objective.

I find three contradictions in Kuvempu's mode of creativity:

1. Though a shudra, he grew up in the Ramakrishna Ashram, developed a deep belief in the teachings of Ramakrishna, Aurobindo and others, and accepted Hindu dharma. However, at the same time, he proclaims: 'Put aside these many sullied sects and come, open-armed, to join the one human sect.'
2. He accepted the socialist ideology of equal life for all, equal share for all. Yet he also supported an anti-socialist, feudal, zamindari system.
3. He opposed brahminical practices in the Hindu caste system but, through his silence, accepted the shudra oppression of the dalit.

Against the backdrop of these contradictions, I shall try to analyse the dalit life that is depicted in Kuvempu's novels. For the purpose of this essay, let us limit the meaning of dalit to the untouchables. The word dalit acquires different meanings in different contexts, hence this caveat.

Before we analyse dalit life as represented in Kuvempu's narratives, we need to be aware of the caste system and class dynamics as they figure in the novels. Four important castes [jati] appear in his novels: 1) brahmins, 2) gowdas–vokkaligas, 3) Muslims, and 4) Christians.

Brahmins in his novels never tax themselves with physical work. Preaching superstitions to villagers, practising astrology, distributing holy ash, making sacrifices

to ghosts and spirits, performing rituals or smearing ash and vermillion on the sick instead of administering medicine—with tactics such as these, they exploit the common people. The Vedas, puranas and shastras are their greatest assets and their means of livelihood. And they live like this without lacking anything. The food they consume in their agraharas [brahmin habitations] and their fruit rasayana are a heavenly feast for shudras. Brahmins are at the topmost rung in the caste ladder. Characters like Manjabhatta have even managed to own lands through their lending-and-borrowing business. They have an intellectual hold on everybody. They cannot stand people like Hoovayya and Devayya[2] who challenge their holy texts. There is no limit to how low they can stoop to safeguard their class interests.

The vokkaligas or gowdas are landowners. They are positioned after the brahmins in the caste order. Only they can own land, they insist. They hold a grudge against Halepaika Sesanaika, who went against their wishes and cultivated land. People belonging to the billava, hasalera, kumbara, halepaika castes, all hailing from regions at the foot of the Western Ghats, as well as all the untouchables, are the hard-working labourers in the fields of these landowners. Let alone the low castes, even Muslims and Christians may not enter vokkaliga or gowda houses. If farm hands or bonded labourers acted against their wishes, they would employ Muslim goons to beat the rebels into subservience [a practice known as 'honnalihodetha']. Apart from that, the heggades [a dominant shudra caste], who played Brahma–Vishnu–Maheshwara to the dalits, and presided over their birth and death rituals, marriages and festivals, debts and obligations, divided the dalits among themselves as if they were property. If the brahmin's intellectual exploitation is one face of the coin, the gowda's economic exploitation is another.

Having lost their power, Muslims are, in the character Hamira Nayaka's phrasing, like snakes without teeth. Mostly into business, robbery and dacoity, and famous for honnalihodetha, everyone fears them. As they are ready to do anything for money, the gowdas use them as weapons for their selfish needs.

The British, sitting high on the Indian throne, used their authority to spread Christianity. They believed that by converting a gowda, it will become easier to convert the others. They go on a spree, opening schools and hospitals, and using women to lure people. With the arrival of the Christians, bicycles, coffee, medicines, indeed a whole new civilization make their way into the Malnad region. A gowda like Devayya too crops his hair, rides a cycle and begins to drink coffee. The Christians not only criticize the Hindu religion, the caste system and superstitious traditions, but also convert an untouchable like Bachcha and fill him with enough confidence to say, 'If you go to a brahmin's house or a gowda's, don't just stand in the veranda, step in and sit in the portico.' Thus far oppressed intellectually by the brahmins and economically by the

gowdas, the 'dalits who were in the dark even when the entire village had seen the light of the day, began to see the light of progress with the Christian mode of education.' This is an indisputable fact.

This much must be clear from my account. Brahmins in an indirect manner, and gowdas more directly, have been responsible for the intellectual, mental, physical and economic bankruptcy of the dalits. Below the brahmins come the gowdas, below the gowdas, the dalits. In this caste pyramid, the brahmin's foot is on the shudra and the shudra's on the dalit! So the shudra's oppression of dalits is more direct than the brahmin's, and more inhuman. Kuvempu does depict the plight of the dalits but his sympathies clearly lie with the feudal zamindar, the gowda. That he is more anti-brahmin than pro-dalit is evident in the 1,400-page-long novels *Kaanuru Subbamma Heggadathi* and *Malegalalli Madumagalu*. For Kuvempu, the brahmin at the top is visible, but he fails to comprehend the dalit suffering at the bottom.

In India, when a writer belonging to one caste writes about another, the fundamental question is whether the other life he has portrayed is realistic or not, since one's caste determines one's social behaviour. It is on such occasions that the integrity of the writer or the literary piece comes under question.

I think three things are essential if literature is to be realistic:

1. The free mingling of castes and classes,
2. Contemporaneity and
3. Realist representation.

Both *Kaanuru Subbamma Heggadathi* and *Malegalalli Madumagalu* are set in the latter half of the nineteenth century. They describe a reality that is not contemporary with Kuvempu but of a generation before him. Since Kuvempu lived in a Ramakrishna Ashram till he completed his higher education, did he get enough time and opportunities to mingle freely with the dalits of Malnad? That must remain as a question. In that respect, writing a historical novel is indeed a difficult task. But, since Kuvempu spent his holidays roaming around Malnad and was at home with brothers, friends, bonded and wage labourers, he could portray the life of dalits and gowdas—who are interdependent, like the neem tree and the peepal tree.

There is no doubt that Kuvempu sketches an arresting picture of the life of dalits as visible from the outside. Bhaira, a bela, brewing liquor in stealth, duping Mark the Christian; Ganga, dying from fear of ghosts; the filth of the untouchable lane; skinny dogs; untouchables sunbathing in the morning and picking out lice; Gutti eloping with Thimmi; Gutti evading the police and running away; Ijaara Saabi thrashing Sanna Beera with a tamarind stick on the orders of Kallegowda; Gutti's dog Huliya being washed

away in the floods—Kuvempu depicts these incidents vividly. However, the inner confusions, conflicts, anxieties and despair of the characters in these incidents are never probed; the narrative never assumes that there is any complexity in their inner life. The love triangle of Hoovayya–Ramayya–Sita; Subbanna Heggade grieving for his son; Rangamma's pain after she is widowed; Mukundayya–Chinnamma's ups and downs; Chandregowda's anger; Singappagowda's cunning ploy; Puttanna's pain on losing Tiger —the talent and freshness with which Kuvempu writes about these do not extend to his portrayals of dalit life. Of that, he merely brushes the surface.

To illustrate this, it is necessary to describe a few characters and situations in the novels. Similar to the romantic triangle between Hoovayya, Ramayya and Sita in *Kaanuru Heggadathi*, is a love triangle in *Malegalalli Madumagalu* between Gutti, Bachcha and Thimmi. Hoovayya and Sita desire each other, as do Gutti and Thimmi. Just as Ramayya comes in the way of Hoovayya and Sita, Bachcha intrudes in Gutti's and Thimmi's relationship. In the case of Hoovayya–Ramayya–Sita, Kuvempu explores their motivations and makes them rounded characters—not so in the Gutti– Bachcha–Thimmi triangle. Another convincing example is the contrast in the depiction of Puttanna and his dog Tiger in *Kaanuru Heggadathi* and Gutti and his dog Huliya in *Malegalalli Madumagalu*. What Tiger is to Puttanna's life, Huliya is to Gutti's. Huliya is seriously injured by Kurka's bite. When Gutti realizes he can do no more, he carries Huliya to Seena Nayaka's house, where he is nursed back to life with medicines and arrack. Assuming that Thimmi, whom he had kidnapped for love, is responsible for Huliya's plight, he curses her saying: 'Ill-fated whore! Because of you, my dog had to suffer! At what unholy hour were you born to devour my Huliya so?' He weeps copiously after handing Huliya to Mukundayya. When such a loved dog later falls into the river and dies, how it would have grieved Gutti! Yet, though Kuvempu describes the situation with intensity, he does not dwell for a moment on Gutti's grief. The death of Puttanna's dog, Tiger, is narrated quite differently. Bhaira, a holeya, observing Puttanna draping his old, precious dhoti around Tiger and grieving as he buries the dog, wonders 'Can one grieve like this for a dog?' Sitting by Tiger's grave, Puttanna cranes his neck up at the sky, sees Tiger in the passing clouds, imagines he is going to heaven and is exhilarated at the thought. We can draw a similar contrast between the way Subbanna Heggade and Bhaira grieve for their respective dead sons. These illustrations throw light on Kuvempu's limitations and attitude.

Despite all this, like a couple of stars twinkling in a clouded sky, the same dalit characters shine and rise in protest. After Thimmi elopes with Gutti, Kallegowda is enraged because he has lost a bonded labourer. He ties Sanna Beera to a tree and gets Ijaara Saabi to cane him. Sanna Beera can never forget that pain. The tragedy here is that Sanna Beera is furious not at the system that brought him this misery but at Ijaara

Saabi who is merely a pawn in the hands of the system. He is gripped by revenge. There is a conversation between Sanna Beera and Dodda Beera that runs thus:

Sanna Beera: That filthy husband of a widow! I promise to drink an urn-ful of milk if someone murders him.

Dodda Beera: Where will you get so much milk from? You won't even be able to afford a spoonful of milk for your child if your wife gives birth.

Sanna Beera: Appa, don't joke. It seems they butchered Mookimane Iranna and drank his blood. If I also don't drink their blood like that, I'm not my father's son. Keep watching. The bruise on my back is still fresh. I kept quiet that day only because our master, who has fed us, was present there. Let me get another chance, I'll show him what I can do. I have sharpened my sickle and kept it ready. I'll hit him so hard that with one stroke his elephant head will fall.

Dodda Beera's words of caution—'You are like a tramp eyeing the moon'—fail to fall on Sanna Beera's ears. He steals the bundle of salted fish tied to Karimeen Saba's horse and lets the animal loose. On another occasion, when Saba slaughters Gutti's pregnant goat and eats it, Sanna Beera sees a great chance for revenge. 'Thoo, whatever happens, we shouldn't let them get away today. We should extract their meat like this, bhava,' he tells his brother-in-law Dodda Beera, spitting in fury.

As a result, a fight erupts between the holeyas and the Muslims. Both parties suffer injuries. Sanna Beera breaks Ijaara Saabi's finger and beats him up. As a consequence, Gutti is forced to leave the village. But that is another story. By seeking revenge, Sanna Beera becomes a symbol of rebellion. Still, a small incident like this in a novel that extends to several hundred pages can hardly be deemed significant. The dalit characters live mostly within the simple earthy limits of liquor–meat–lust and so on, without protesting, rebelling or comprehending their situation. Kuvempu can only watch dalit life standing on the master's pedestal; he can never do it sitting inside a holeya's hut.

To write about exploitation, a writer should have a clear understanding and conviction about the exploitative nature of the system. In the absence of such a position, or if the writer who talks of exploitation at one level fails to protest against the same at another, it becomes clear that he has only his own community's interest in mind. To say that Kuvempu is guilty of such ambivalence while writing about the life of the dalits is not tantamount to decrying his achievement.

It is essential to make myself clear about this ambivalence through a few examples. In *Kaanuru Heggadathi*, Obayya goes to the agrahara to make an offering to God, but does not find the astrologer there and is exhausted. He is thirsty. A brahmin boy lets him have water in a vessel and some country jaggery on a plantain leaf. Standing afar for fear of pollution from his touch, he tells Obayya, 'Drink without touching the vessel to

your lips.' Obayya, not used to drinking that way, drops water all over his face. The brahmin boys are disgusted at the sight. Narrating the incident, Kuvempu writes, 'The contempt for shudras that their elders had instilled in the brahmin boys swelled up a little more.' But he makes no comment while describing how Chandregowda's youngest son Vasu is enraged with holeya Baira's son, Ganga, for stealing the young ones of a bird for meat. Though he knows he should not touch a bela, Vasu thrashes Ganga, snatches the birds from him and throws them away. Then 'as a penance for touching a bela, he goes to a cowshed, stamps on the cow dung [to purify himself] and enters his house through the back door.'

Consider another instance. It is Chinnamma's wedding. The holeyas, Manja, Thimma, Siddha and Baira, are playing the vaalaga [a pipe played during auspicious occasions]. This is how Kaadu, Thimma, Dharmu and other Gowda boys talk about them.

One says, 'Kaadannayya, doesn't that one look like Halemane Baira?'

Another, 'He is part of the marriage band.'

'Can you imagine anyone getting Halemane Baira to play in a marriage band?'

'Dharmbhava, doesn't he look like your holeya, Baira?'

'Thoo! Why would anyone have holeyas play in a marriage band, what do you say, Dharmu?'

By now, Baira, feeling proud that he is playing in a marriage band, calls out, 'I think our konooru little masters didn't recognize me. It's me Halemane Baira.'

In response, as though the mere act of listening to a low-caste band would cause them dishonour, they shrink back, retorting, 'Thoo! Come on guys, imagine listening to these beef-eaters playing the marriage band,' and move away in disgust. Kuvempu, who protests when the brahmin boys show disgust for the shudras, does not react when the shudra boys show similar disrespect for the dalits. Why?

The incident where Kallegowda has Sanna Bheera tied to a tree and then thrashed is significant in many different ways. A landowner assaulting a bonded labourer is heinous and inhuman. Thrashed by Ijaara Saabi, Sanna Beera lies there, writhing in pain. Neither his pain, nor Dodda Beera falling at his feet, begging mercy for his son, moves Kallegowda in any way. He sits like a stone. Devayya, a rebel against brahmin oppression, goads him on: 'Hit those whore-sons so hard that their backs crack.' Just then, Sesi runs out of her hut, plucks the tamarind cane from Ijaara Saabi's hand and throws it away. In this horrific, savage instance, Kuvempu's admiration for Sesi's motherly instinct is hardly appropriate. Let alone protest against this beating of a labourer, Kuvempu does not even sympathize with him. Sadly, he even defends the assaulter Kallegowda, and dubs Sesi's thoughts on how to put an end to this oppression as 'malicious'.

If bonded labour is one face of feudalism, sexual exploitation is another. The rich landlords use dalit girls who toil in the fields to satiate their lust. Issues like pollution and untouchability, which bother them otherwise, never surface in such situations. Shrubby regions in the fields and barns are their playing fields. When Thimmappa Heggade rapes Putti's daughter behind the haystack, Kuvempu writes: 'Like a high-breed dog, fed on home-cooked food that turns into a complete scamp when in heat and breaks free from its chains and jumps the guns seeking the company of a street dog, no matter how ugly or scabies-ridden it may be, Thimmappa too seeks pleasure in the low-caste shacks.' The simile that the writer uses—comparing Thimmappa to a well-bred dog and Putti's daughter and other dalit girls to scabies-infested, ugly dogs is indeed deplorable. The writer's concern with the gowda boy's loss of purity, rather than the violence against the dalit girl, is inhumane.

Let us consider a situation that contrasts with this. Gutti is on his way to meet Subbanna Heggade in order to deliver Bharamai Heggade's letter. On the way, the aroma of dosas that wafts from Anthakka Sedthi's house fills him with a craving for it and he goes to her backyard hoping for one. Anthakka Sedthi is inside. Her daughter Kaveri, who has come of age, sees Gutti and comes out. Though a holeya, Gutti was fair-complexioned. Though short, he was well built. He too notices Kaveri. It is a known fact that lust knows no caste or creed. Agreed, Gutti has no right to love Kaveri and it is an impossible situation but is it not possible for a young man, no matter what caste he is, to see a girl and experience his heart go aflutter for a second?

But the writer only tells us how Kaveri watches Gutti. 'As he belonged to the lowest of the low castes, she looked at him as a young horned bull might look at a pig.' A normal man–woman bonding between her and Gutti is not just improbable but is presented as unnatural and impossible. To indicate this impossibility, the author uses a metaphor like young horned bull and pig. However, in the [gowda] group that goes to the Kalloor temple, Devayya is also present. When the brahmin Aithal's wife sees his hairstyle, sleek moustache, the ring on his finger and well-muscled shoulders, 'she cannot take her eyes off him. She makes excuse after excuse to catch a glimpse of Devayya. On another occasion, when Narayana Bhatta, sitting amidst the brahmins, gets up and sits next to Devayya to talk to him, she keenly notes the difference between the two.' When an upper-caste woman looks at a dalit boy, it becomes unnatural, why should the same not apply to a brahmin woman eyeing a gowda boy? Why don't metaphors like scabies-ridden street dog and pig figure in this description?

The gist of my arguments is this: the contradictions, limitations, caste affiliations that Kuvempu carries with him do not serve to bring balance or authenticity to his depiction of dalit life. This observation does not apply to Kuvempu alone but to the works of all

non-dalits who have written about dalits. The answer to this accusation of mine is the body of dalit literature written by dalits, which is unique in content, language and style.

Answers to Some Questions

Q: To visualize a picture of dalit life, does the writer too have to experience life as a dalit? You say Kuvempu has sketched dalit life sitting on a pedestal. Do you mean that it has not been portrayed realistically? If, as you say, a writer must experience everything before expressing it, is it really possible? For example, labour pain.

A: I do argue that literature should arise from experience. Wouldn't a statement not grounded in experience appear dishonest? A person's actions and outwardly behaviour may be visible to all. But his subconscious activities lie snuggled in a shell, covered like a snail. A literary work assumes value or becomes superior not from superficial description but by prying into the subconscious and lending an expression to it. Every writer would have experiential knowledge of the subconscious pains and suffering of his class. No one from another grouping can narrate these pains as convincingly as he. Even if it is possible for another writer, it would at best be a sympathetic narration, not an experiential one. An account of labour pain becomes really meaningful only when a woman writes about it. Though sympathy is a valuable human emotion, we cannot forget that in literature, it is experience that has greater value.

Q: You randomly pick instances and dialogue from a text and apply your own extraneous and ill-formed thoughts to isolated instances. Is this not an non-literary act?

A: My thoughts are not ill-formed. They carry social responsibility and conviction. A very important question about literary and non-literary has arisen here. Those who use literariness, aesthetics, artistry as the yardsticks on which they base their arguments are unable to understand the pain and sadness of crores of dalits. If they actually appreciate exploitation and injustice, saying it is art, it would be paramount to a very low idea of culture. Is this not inhuman, anti-people? These people are making a big mistake by not uttering a word about exploitation and injustice in the name of aesthetic pleasure. They are not very different from fools who wrap filth in silk and praise the silk's artistic quality. Life is greater than art. The nose is of greater value than the nose ring. I feel literary creation and criticism that are insensitive to life are both dangerous and irresponsible.

Channanna Walikar

The litterateur Channanna Walikar grew up surrounded by music. Born in 1943 in Shankarawadi village (Chittapur taluk, Gulbarga district) to Dhoolappa Walikar and Sabamma, Walikar's family was involved with bayalata, an open-air performance tradition. 'Song is common to our people … there is no world without song … and there is a song for every occasion,' he says. He completed his schooling from Shahabad High School, Shahabad, while living with his uncle who was a watchman at the ACC cement factory there. This was also to be his earliest exposure to Marxism and Ambedkar, through witnessing trade union activities and Ambedkar Jayanti and Ambedkar Punyatithi ceremonies at the factory.

Walikar moved to Gulbarga for his graduation and completed his BA from Sharana Basaveshwara Arts College. For his MA (Kannada), Walikar went to Karnatak University, Dharwad, and stayed on for his doctoral studies. He received his Ph.D in 1980 for the thesis *Hyderabad–Karnatakada Gramadevathegala Janapadeeya Adhyayana* (A folkloric analysis of village deities of Hyderabad–Karnataka region), which was published as a book later.

Walikar worked initially as a teacher in a high school and was subsequently appointed as lecturer at LVD College, Raichur, in which capacity he worked from 1967 to 1987. He moved to Gulbarga University in 1987 as reader in the Department of Kannada and retired in 2003 as professor. While at Gulbarga University, Walikar was chairman of the Kannada Research Centre, member of Academic Council, Senate and Syndicate, and also headed the publications division.

Walikar's engagement with the dalit cause is threefold: politically, being one of the founders and important members of Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS), in the Hyderabad–Karnataka region in particular, and Karnataka generally; socially, engaged in issues relating to the reform of the devadasi practice and of bettale seve and the practice of women appearing nude in temples as part of vow-fulfilment; and lastly, his involvement with land distribution in and around north Karnataka.

His involvement with the devadasi cause resulted in a book titled *Karnataka Devadasiyara Samajo Dharmika Arthika Shaikshanika Samskrithika Mattu Rajakeeya Samasyagala Samagra Adhyana* (A Comprehensive Study of Karnataka Devadasis' Social, Religious, Economic, Educational, Cultural and Political Problems). As a writer, he wrote not only about dalit life and people, but was also a

strong dalit voice in the Kannada literary firmament, demanding that the dalit and Bandaya (protest) literature be given due respect and place in Kannada literary circles, particularly in Kannada literary conferences. He also played a prominent part in organizing parallel 'rebel' Kannada literary conferences, because the 'official' Kannada literary conferences would not take the concerns of dalit and Bandaya writers seriously.

Walikar's literary career began while he was a student and his first anthology of poems appeared in 1970 when he was a first-year MA student at Karnatak University, Dharwad. Titled *Marada Melina Gaali* (The Breeze Over the Tree), Walikar says that it is a typical self-published beginner's effort with 'no philosophy' and written in the Navya style. By the time his second anthology, *Kariteli Manavana Jipada* (Song of the Black-headed Man), appeared three years later, Walikar seemed to have acquired a Marxist voice. This anthology won him the Kannada Sahitya Akademi award.

The author of over fifty literary works, Walikar has written across a variety of genres. He has written ten poetry anthologies, which include *Panther Padyagalu* (Panther Poems, 1981) and *Bandedda Dalitara Beedi Hadugalu* (Street Songs of Rebelling Dalits, 1982). He has written five novels: *Belya* (1975), *Kote Bagilu* (The Doorway of the Fort, 1987), *Huligemma* (1989) and *Gramabharata* (Village India, 1992). *Belya*, a story of a shepherd boy, written in the local dialect, has been compared with Devanoora Mahadeva's *Kusumabale*. Walikar says that nobody took this novel seriously when it was published, but its fortunes changed after the renowned Kannada writer Baraguru Ramachandrappa praised it in an article in the newspaper *Prajavani*. *Kappu Kathegalu* (Black Stories) and *Heppugattida Samudra* (The Curdled Ocean) are a couple of his well-known short-story collections. Walikar has also written plays; the more prominent ones are *Tonkada Kelagina Jana* (Below the Waist People), *Agniraja* (King Agni), *Koosina Kandira* (Saw the Baby), *Aviveki Rajana Kathe* (The Story of the Unwise King) and *Jogathi*. His continuing interest in the folk song tradition has resulted in a collection of dappinata. Dappinata, or sannata, is a well-known variety of folk theatre, practiced mainly in north Karnataka and the neighbouring districts of Malnad. 'Sannata' literally means a small play. It is also known as dappinata because dappu (a circular hand-held drum) is the main accompanying instrument in these performances. The ten dappinata that Walikar has written are collected in a volume titled *Samagra Dappinata Samputa*.

Walikar's recent work is an epic written in the stream-of-consciousness style with no punctuation. Titled *Vymaayoma* (The Space of Space), it is a massive literary effort running into over a thousand pages. Walikar says that this epic is about philosophy and the reader would find all philosophies here, from Buddha to Basava to Ambedkar and

many more. Regarding the punctuation-less style he adopted, Walikar says, 'Philosophy is continuous … it has no full stop, no commas.'

Headnote written by S. Jayasrinivasa Rao

Whether One Loses or Wins, One Should Stand Up and Fight, Even Against God

Translated by S. Jayasrinivasa Rao

I call my friend Geetha Nagabhushana 'pehle aap, pehle aap' for two reasons. One, because she is a year older than me; two, whatever viewpoint one comes at it from, she is ahead of me when it comes to writing. And because of this, whenever she is conferred titles and awards, is promoted to higher positions, gets government honours and the like, I, more than anyone else, am the happiest and say that the honours are justified.

But there are many who, despite being lesser than me in all respects, always push me behind and move ahead, indulging in needless politics and gaining name, fame, wealth, honours and posts. I don't know what to do when these things happen. Despite these injustices happening in front of my eyes, it is my fault that I don't push forward and keep quiet due to some obligation, friendship, kinship, inferiority complex, etc.

The reason for the failures, disappointments and distress in my life is my weak mind. I would feel like Arjuna who came face-to-face with his teachers, elders, relatives and cousins in the battlefield of Kurukshetra, and wondered how he would ever raise arms against them in the war. When I saw people close to me getting government honours, posts in akademis and universities, even if I wanted to be in the race for those posts and honours, I would step back due to some obligation to these very same people. But when the post would slip through my fingers, I would be upset and despair inwardly. This is because I behave like a drop of water on a lotus leaf. I despair like this because I am like a lotus that grows in dirty slush. Now I have come to feel there shouldn't be excessive regard for anybody; one shouldn't fall prey to any kind of love, affection, or attachments. As our Anubhava poets [medieval rebel poets in Kannada] say, one should fast after having eaten, be a celibate while enjoying sensual pleasures and lead a life believing that in my welfare is the world's welfare. As Ambedkar says, nobody will come forward and offer me a seat and help me get rid of my problems of feeling

obligated to everyone or help me forge ahead without bending or feeling small. We should get our chairs for ourselves. We should sit on them and start our rule.

II

When I was about to submit my Ph.D thesis in 1982, my guide made me promise that I would not apply for a university post till his first Ph.D student had got a job. 'Anyway, you have a job in a college for your living,' he said. I kept my promise and did not apply for a university job until my senior got one. As a result, from 1982 to 1987, I fell into a pitch-dark pit. Despite the many opportunities that came up, I did not apply because of this promise. Finally, it was only after my guide's first Ph.D student got a job in a university that I began putting in my applications and got a university job. My guide was very pleased with me.

Listening to everything that others say, giving away one's chances to one's friends and relatives when they ask for it, being like a tamed bull, becoming a sheep in the slaughterhouse, becoming one with the crowd, being the yes-man agreeing to the words of powerful people, are all the traits that I carry from birth. The reason for all this is the poverty, ignorance, blind beliefs, being suppressed by the upper classes in all possible ways … like this … not just one or two … there are hundreds of reasons for this pain. And moreover, when I was studying in school, the ideals portrayed by Punyakoti the cow, Yudhishthira who always told the truth, Karna who sacrificed his life to keep his promise, Harishchandra who lost his wife and son and became the caretaker of the cremation ground to uphold the truth, were all taught to us. Our shastras and puranas are filled with these ideals and I trusted and believed in them; and, anyway, it was my nature to endure everything.

The episode in the Ramayana where Shambuka, who had sat down to meditate to gain knowledge was murdered, or in the Mahabharata where Drona, in order to protect his star disciple Arjuna, asks Ekalavya, whom he had never taught, to cut off his thumb and offer it up as gurudakshina never instilled the seeds of rebellion in me. I read them as stories and passed them off as ideas in a book. And Manu saying that lower classes were born to only serve the upper classes … all of these kept me from growing up in a dynamic manner … and this is the reason why, while all those who studied with me joined various universities in Karnataka, I was the only one who remained in a college in Raichur for a long time.

III

Half my career was thus spent in schools and colleges. I joined the university during the last stage of my career on a reserved vacancy for backward classes. Even at this point,

when I applied, some friends remarked, ‘Anyway you have a college job, why don’t you keep working there, why do you have to move?’ Ignoring these remarks, I applied. I was a reserved-category candidate and I had the qualifications; I was selected in the interview and joined the university.

Sometime later, the post of president of an akademi fell vacant. There were many contenders. My name was nominated on behalf of the backward classes. A friend who got to know of this took me to the minister concerned and made me say, ‘I don’t want to be the president of any akademi; please nominate this friend of mine for the post.’ The minister looked at me and laughed. But later, the contest for the akademi president’s post became intense, and my friend who made me take back my candidature lost out; the post went to some other person. I was left with sand in my mouth for saying that I didn’t want the president’s post.

I had many more mad ideas. I would find joy in the happiness of others; Saraswati alone is enough, Lakshmi is not at all necessary; a hut is enough, a big house is not necessary; only that much as is required to eat and dress well is needed, a life of affluence is not something to aspire to; I believed in the saying, ‘A king is worshipped by his subjects, but a scholar is worshipped universally.’ I was always introverted instead of being open and always introspective.

Ramakrishna Paramahamsa once told this story: Two friends studied together in an ashram and went their different ways after their studies, and each wrote an epic. Later, they met on a boat while crossing a river. The second friend started crying over the fact that the first one’s epic had become well known and his epic had remained obscure. The first friend asked the second friend why he was crying. The second friend said, ‘As long as your epic exists, no one will bother about mine,’ and started crying all over again. The first friend immediately throws his highly praised book into the river and said, ‘Now onwards your epic will find fame in the world, don’t cry,’ and thus consoling him, gets off at the bank near his village and goes home. I had always found happiness and satisfaction in the progress and prosperity of my friends, close relatives and others and this story is the one which restrained me further and didn’t allow me to sit up and take notice.

IV

Towards the end of my career, applications were called for the post of professor. I applied for the reserved post as well as for the merit promotion scheme post. A friend of mine applied only for the reserved post. All his friends and well-wishers started hounding me relentlessly, saying, ‘Please don’t try for the reserved post, try only for the merit promotion scheme post.’ They would say over and over, ‘Both are the same; you’ll become a professor in the reserved scheme as well as in the merit promotion

scheme; please make this sacrifice so that one of your friends can also prosper.' Finally, I gave in to their entreaties. The vice chancellor also added his voice to their words and so I did as they suggested. I became a professor under the merit promotion scheme and my friend became a professor under the reservation scheme. We took our appointment orders and joined our new posts.

When these appointments were sent to the government for approval, they approved only the reservation posts. They did not give their approval to the merit promotion scheme posts, saying that this scheme was discontinued from 1986. I was given the order in 1995! When the vice chancellor told me that my professor's post was being cancelled, I felt as if the sky had fallen on my head; the only thing left was to die of an exploding heart!

I wanted to please everybody and became a fool! I wanted to be a big man and became an idiot! I wanted to become a good man and died in the process! I tried to become a benefactor to the whole world and became a demon for my own family! When I was returning from Bangalore with the vice chancellor in the Udyan Express train, he said despondently, 'You will have to forgo your professor's post. What can we do when we don't have approval from the government?' and went to his reserved berth to sleep. I couldn't sleep the whole night. By the time we reached Gulbarga, I was burning with anger as if I was on fire and was lying down burnt and charred. Finally, a year later, in 1996, I learnt that along with the new pay structure, my professorship had also been approved under the UGC's Career Advancement Scheme. I was feeling dead so far and now felt as if life had come back into me. It was as if I, who had lost the desire to live and wanted to hang myself, was given the elixir of life.

V

In order to prevent a disaster like this, towards the end of my career, I decided to straighten myself out. I told myself that I wouldn't bring any harm to anybody, nor would I allow harm to befall me. I decided to operate on the basis of the rule of law. Ideology is more important than friendship; rule of law is more important than love and affection and the heart; values are more important than obligations, and struggle more important than ideals. From very early on, my affinity had been to Valmiki, the maharshi of ideals, rather than Vyasa, the maharshi of struggle; and that is the reason for all this crying and dying so far. It is more important for man to live in the practical world than in the world of fantasy and ideals—this alone would lead to happiness, peace of mind and solace to oneself as well as others. This theory would ensure that one doesn't come to any harm, nor are others harmed and situations won't arise where one has to sacrifice for the sake of others and, according to the reservation rule, one will get what one is entitled to. Nobody is impressed if somebody struggles to live in today's practical world by

hanging on to the ideals of the old days. The old ideals no longer hold value. People are concerned about their own welfare alone. This kind of sacrifice and virtue is only momentary now and everyone has become a 'kama purti mama', that is, people who take the help of others and ignore them later. The consequences of my idealism caused me think a lot. I told myself repeatedly that I shouldn't become a sacrificial victim like I had been. And many examples of people who held on to ideals, and the injustices that they suffered, started coming to mind.

There was an incident where Mr Hamilpurkar in our university was denied the professor's post, which went to his student instead, and resulted in Mr Hamilpurkar dying of a heart attack. When I heard this, I felt I was being flung on the floor and thrashed. There was another incident in Delhi where a scientist was supposed to get the post of director in his institute, but when it was given to his student, this scientist committed suicide by jumping from the top of a building. When I read this in the papers, my heart went cold. When one doesn't get justice, when promotions are denied and even after one goes to the courts one doesn't get one's rightful positions, status and honours, many people go mad and roam the streets like beggars and die on the roads. After seeing all this, I have grown a lot wiser. I told myself that I shouldn't hang on to ideals and become a victim of some obligation. I decided to keep my hands, body, mind, brain and all my senses under control, and continue with my life.

Recently, I heard that the vice chancellor's post in a university was vacant. Like many others, I too wanted to be a serious contender for that post and started putting in my efforts. A friend of mine who saw that I was actively pursuing the post asked me to withdraw in his favour and not to continue with my efforts. I was no longer the nodding ox of the past, I was not the one who'd be part of the crowd any more, I was no longer the yes-man of the olden days. As Krishna said in the Bhagavadgita, I was ready to fight with anyone in the battlefield. I was like Arjuna who fought Lord Shiva in *Kiraatarjuniya*. Love, affection and all family ties are false. There is only one duty, one morality, one law, one Constitution of India—everybody should act strictly according to that. We should take what we are supposed to get, shouldn't sacrifice ourselves for anybody and we shouldn't be charitable, I told my friend clearly.

'Let the ten of us who are contenders for the vice chancellor's post be sporting. Only one among the ten will get the post. We can't say who that will be. All of us should try and the winner will be decided on the basis of abilities and efforts. This is like a game of musical chairs. Among the ten, only after nine are eliminated will the last person standing win the contest. If somebody gets the post in this manner, none of us need feel unhappy. The rest of us who couldn't get the post should come together and congratulate the winner. It would be wrong to ask someone who wants to contest elections to not to stand for elections at all. In a democracy, everyone has the right to stand for elections,

to try for a post and to conduct oneself according to the law. One person being sacrificed for another person is not democracy.' So saying, I set out to submit my application.

On a Raft Made of Entrails

Translated by S. Jayasrinivasa Rao

It was four in the afternoon. The rain, which had started in the morning, showed no signs of relenting. There was slush everywhere. Water everywhere. The village river Kagina was overflowing. From the top of the house, one could see that the river had extended its tongue towards the village. The next day was the Nagara Panchami festival. Elder sister from Yenagunti was yet to arrive. She had to cross two rivers to reach our village. She couldn't come because of the overflowing rivers and heavy rain. Father, who was immersed in serving Maligowda, the gowda-kulkarni of the village, hadn't thought about this. Long ago, a woman in our village had composed a three-line song about my father and I felt I could hear that song in the distance …

Walikara, why do you want a good wife
You go roaming around the country! Your lass
Is drooping like the tender plantain leaf.

Father's sister stepped out of the house in that rain with a basket to cover the hens. On seeing her, my heart started burning. Her hut, which was now outside the village, was sodden and leaking. The gowda had given her and my uncle a hut next to the rubbish heap near his house. Everyone in my family—father, elder brother, uncles and Muthya—would come out and fight against anyone who opposed the gowda. They have been in and out of courts because of this. They have also gone to jail. The gowda had given my uncle the house next to the rubbish heap because of his loyalty. When he grew old, the gowda, listening to his children's advice, had evicted him from the house and demolished it.

In a quarrel related to the gowda's lands, the menfolk of my house had all gone to jail, and as I remembered his behaviour during those days, I felt as if balls of fire were falling from the sky. I was a ten-year-old boy then. I begged: 'Gowdre, we have nothing to eat at home, no money to buy anything. My grandmother cries helplessly. Please give

us something. We are dying of hunger.' The gowda, who was being advised by his children, didn't bother to listen to my entreaties; he mounted his horse and rode towards his fields. There is no count to the amount of suffering we endured for the five years that the men in the family were all in jail. Tears would soak our cheeks every day.

Father was the village boatman, an occupation that has been with our family for generations. Elder brother continues the caste-assigned profession of our family (Walikara) of being the village messenger and guard. Elder uncle goes out to do coolie work, while younger uncle does odd jobs in the upper-caste localities. Muthya sits in the Hanuman temple and makes ropes for the villagers. I was the only one who went to school. I realized that continuing in this family profession would never bring us out of poverty. So I studied hard, day and night.

I remember a statement by Bernard Shaw in one of his plays, which said: 'Drive away poverty. It is the root of sin.' Poverty was eating into the vitals of our family. During Nagara Amavase festival, we didn't have enough in our house to make even the celebratory holige. We had to ask our neighbours for buttermilk. Life dragged on somehow.

As the clouds increased and darkness began to spread, the sun disappeared. I was unable to read. The cattle in the barn stood still. Father was in the Hanuman temple, elder brother in the veranda. Grandmother and I were here at home. The people of the village were in their homes, quiet like stones.

II

The rain showed no signs of abating. I looked at my watch. Soon it would be five. I was studying in a college and had come home for the festival. If I had known it was going to rain like this, I wouldn't have come. I would have stayed back in the comfort of my room at the government hostel in Gulbarga. When I recalled that people who lived in cities, amidst colour and comforts like films, TV, radio, newspapers, hotels, bazaars and political speeches, don't know what happens in villages and how people manage their lives, I got up and stepped out on to the veranda.

I looked out at the village from my veranda. It was divided into three sections. The swamiji, who lived in the upper-caste myageri would come every morning and evening to all houses to seek food in the name of God. The gowda-kulkarni landlords would get their fields tended by labourers and lead a life of comfort. The farmers who lived in the myageri worked in the fields, and the poor would do wage labour and get by.

The people who lived in the lower-caste locality, the kelageri, belonged to different castes like the kuruba [shepherds], kabbaliga [fisherfolk], byada [hunter-gatherers], korava [basket/mat weavers], golla [cowherds], and continued their hereditary caste

occupations. But one can't bear to relate the hardships faced by the people living outside the village in the holageri [locality of the holeya] and madarageri [locality of the madiga]. They would go to Shahabad for contract work, carrying sand and gravel on construction sites. They would cut wood, mind cattle, make cow-dung cakes and sell them. It was important somehow to go on with life. They never thought about the comfortable lives of people living in the myageri because their own lives were tough enough to keep them fully occupied. I would have continued to stand and think about many random things while it was pouring outside. But Grandmother called, 'Chenna, I have made tea. Come and drink it while it is hot.'

After Mother's death, Grandmother was the one who brought us up. My father couldn't bear to see the hardships faced by her and wanted to get elder brother married soon [so that she would have some help in the house]. She'd get up at four in the morning and that would be it. Till ten in the night, she wouldn't relax. As soon as she got up, she'd wash her face, hands and feet. Start cooking. Start cleaning the house. Get fodder ready for the cattle. Whenever there was a birth or death in the village, she'd always be ready to help. She didn't know what boredom or fatigue was. Like the sun, she was working all the time.

It didn't bother her if she had nothing to eat. But she needed tea three or four times a day. And along with her tea, she would light up a beedi. If I asked why she smoked, she'd say, 'I smoke beedi for my stomach pain, son.' I drank the tea and was about to sit on the seat in the veranda, when Maadara Malla, one of gowda's servants, came and said, 'Listen, our gowda has asked me to bring along Dhoolappa, Basanthanna and others. Our Ningamma-gowdathi has come up to the Bhankoora River and is on the other side. She needs help to cross the river, we have to go and bring her.'

I didn't respond, sitting there rock-still. Malla didn't know what to do. He heard my father's and brother's voices in the distance and took off in that general direction. However much our kelageri people helped the gowda, there was never any acknowledgement and whenever I think of the injustices and atrocities committed by him on our people, my heart would hiss angrily like a snake. 'What is the point of storing bitter neem and sweet jaggery together; what is the point of feeding milk to a snake,' Purandaradasa must have sung these lines after seeing people like the gowda. Helping a wicked man like the gowda is like living with a poisonous snake by one's side.

III

Malla knew my nature. When I was young, I had once gone to defecate in the place where the myageri boys also went. They caught hold of me and thrashed me. I waited for an opportune moment to take revenge. One of their boys had come to our keri, and I

thrashed him mercilessly with an acacia stick that I had kept ready for the past six months especially for this purpose. ‘Just because I sat for a shit in the same place as you do, you beat me up, didn’t you, bastards? Now if you come to our keri, I will thrash you,’ I raged. Hearing that one of their boys had been thrashed, the other myageri boys arrived, ready to retaliate, but when they saw my fiery mood, they just went back. Malla had witnessed this. When he saw that I did not respond, he turned to go. He went to the Hanuman temple in the rain and told them what gowda had said and so Father and elder brother came home running in the pouring rain.

They went to the barn and began searching for the dried shells of the pumpkin gourds.[1] Father said to elder brother, ‘Go and bring your uncles, Muthya, and all the men in our keri.’ He went, leaving the searching to Father. When I heard Father say this, I grew furious and began shouting at him. ‘Even when these myageri people keep us down, we are ready go and die for them. If they actually do some good for us, God knows what you’d do!’ Father was quiet. He did not know how to answer me. My anger rose. ‘Father, all of you have grown old under this gowda’s rule. You people even went to jail for him. Shouldn’t he have some regard at least for this? Why did he evict Uncle and Aunt from that house? Now he wants us to die in this rain?’ Father behaved as if he hadn’t heard me at all and continued to scrutinize the pumpkin gourds.

Elder brother returned with my uncles and Muthya. Not only is Father risking his life, he is taking others with him. ‘These older people are all like this. But elder brother is of my generation. Shouldn’t he at least be able to understand what I am saying?’ A small cinder of worry began to singe me. I could hear a bird screeching on a faraway tree.

Father turned to elder brother and said, ‘The river is swollen. This gourd won’t be enough to get Ningamma-gowdathi across the river. Go to the washerman Yamunappa and get the udigi and the pumpkin gourd from Mylari. And ask them to come too,’ and sent him off. I got angrier.

Grandmother who was inside preparing the evening meal heard my outburst and came out. ‘Why are you jumping about, my son? What is happening?’ I told her what was happening. She behaved as if she did not hear anything and went back inside. I didn’t know what to do, where to look. What has happened to our people? Not just one or two, the gowda has committed innumerable atrocities. Why have they become like sheep meekly extending their necks to the butcher’s knife? How could I get them back on track? Till these people understand this and become aware, they will serve this gowda to their dying day. I kept thinking about this but nobody seemed to pay any attention to my words of rebellion.

There were only two rooms in our house. The room at the higher level was called the upper house and the one at ground level, the lower house. While sitting around and sleeping was done in the upper house, cooking and bathing was done in the lower

house. Whenever people came to visit, we had a large veranda and a platform, built by our elders, where they could sit. The news of the efforts being made to bring Ningammagowdathi across the river reached the village within seconds and people started gathering in our veranda one by one.

With people coming and the veranda filling up, my anger reached its zenith. Around this time, the gowda also came and sat on the floor of the veranda. When Grandmother saw him sitting on the floor, she went in and brought out a mat and, asking him to rise, spread it for him to sit. When I saw this, I felt as if someone had set fire to me. 'This gowda has done all kinds of evil things to us, forced us go hungry and thrashed us, and you people still run around for him? If he had done any good to us, we would have given our lives to him. Thoo … go to hell all of you,' I shouted in anger.

Father finally opened his mouth. He didn't mind getting hurt, but he didn't want the gowda to get hurt. He said, 'This boy studies in the city, that's why he talks like this. Please don't take this to heart. This is a matter concerning our village, we should not abandon our efforts.'

When Father said this, the gowda said, 'Forget it, Dhoolappa, I consider him one of my sons. All children are not equally good, are they? One of them turns out like this; another like that. How can all the children be good from birth itself?'

With these lofty words, gowda made me look small in front of all the people and looked large-hearted himself. I grew more angry. The tigers inside me began growling.

Since white sugar was expensive, Grandmother would make tea with coarse sugar or jaggery every day. Seeing that the gowda had visited her home, Grandmother prepared tea for him and brought it. She wanted to serve tea to the others too, but the crowd was growing. She just took the empty cup and saucer from the gowda and went back inside.

Apart from me, everybody else in our house was liked in the village. Any auspicious event in the village, and Father would be there. Any death or misfortune, and he would be at the house. He didn't know what wickedness meant. He would say to me, 'Rude people are bitter like the neem; people who get abused are fragrant like the mango.' Because of his nature, people in the village would always come when he called. They would come and talk with him.

Elder brother brought the udige from Yamunappa and the pumpkin gourd from Mylarappa. Many brought dried pumpkin gourds from their houses. They were arranged to form a raft and people began strapping them together with jute ropes. Father realized that the rope would not be enough. He said to Kwatagiri Malappa, 'Brother, we need to tie this up properly, go and get more rope from your house. Hurry!'

Kwatagiri Malappa came back with a ball of jute rope. Everyone in the keri worked together to secure the gourds into a raft.

IV

The sun had begun to set. It was neither day nor night. With the rain lashing down so hard, both day and night were beaten into pulp. Ignoring my anger and my agitation, the people of the keri got ready to leave when the raft was ready.

Jaya jaya lingana paraakha / ghe paraakha
Shankaralingana paraakha / ghe paraakha
Hanumandevara paraakha / ghe paraakha

Elder brother was leading the group, shouting praises to the gods and behind him walked the villagers, both old and young, carrying the raft. Father, my uncles and Muthya followed them.

Seeing my eyes red with anger, Grandmother came up to me. 'She is the daughter of our village. Don't get angry like this. If we leave her alone at the banks of the Bhankoora River and stay warm here, would the gods like it?' I felt thunder had struck me when I heard her say this. I looked at her as if I would devour her and said, 'My sister too is a daughter of the village, isn't she? Why didn't Father go and bring her home for the festival? If Madara Doddappa's uncle's daughter had been stranded at the riverbank, would all our people have run around like this to help?'

Grandmother didn't have an answer to this. She knew the game. She didn't know anything more. She played her part and went inside.

My people have been steeped in ignorance since time immemorial; my people are poor and naive. I wanted to follow them and see in what other ways they were going to sacrifice themselves. I slipped off my lungi and put on trousers. I took a torch with me, knowing that it would be dark by the time I returned and, since it was raining, I also took an umbrella. I looked at my watch. It was 5.30 p.m. It would take another hour and a half for the sun to set. Would these people who had set out come back by that time? Anxiety began gnawing at me.

'If we have to reach the banks of the Bhankoora River, we have to first go to the banks of the Jeevanigi River.' I remembered my father saying this. I left my house and when I didn't see anybody my heart started beating faster. Following his words, I started walking towards Jeevanigi. I could see the people of my keri ahead in the distance, shouting praises to God and carrying the raft. When I realized that Father, Uncle and Muthya were there in that crowd, my heartbeat returned to normal.

The people at the front of the crowd were walking as though they were leading a festival procession. They continued shouting praises. They moved on, unheeding of all

opinions. But when I saw that gowda was not in that crowd, my anger was reignited. He has sent my people ahead; where has he gone now? I was mumbling in anger when I saw the white turbaned gowda and felt a little better.

Shouting praises to Jayalinga, the people moved quickly ahead. I ran to join them and within ten minutes I was with them. Very soon we came to the banks of the Jeevanigi River. Altogether there were ten people from my house and from our keri. They removed their shirts and lungis, tied these to their heads and stepped into the river. The river was overflowing. It was still raining and the current was swift. As a result they didn't have to swim all that much. They gathered around the raft and it started moving fast.

The gowda was worried about his daughter. I was worried about my people. I hated the gowda. To this day, whenever I remember all the evil deeds of his that I have been witness to since childhood, my heart flares up. Without speaking, the gowda and I walked along the shore of the river and reached the bank of the Yellammayi River on the opposite side of the Bhankoora River. I looked at my watch; it was six. Within the next hour, when the sun is still up, and before darkness gobbles up everything, we had to return to our village.

Ningamma-gowdathi and her brother, who were sitting on the bank of the Bhankoora River, were seated on the raft. My people gathered around the raft and started swimming. The current had gathered pace and the raft started moving rapidly. The gowda and I started walking briskly along the bank of the Bhankoora River. Appa had said while the raft was being launched, 'When we leave the Bhankoora, we will be going to the Malagatti river. Nobody should look behind them till then. Look ahead and swim.' I remembered this, and the gowda and I started walking to reach the Malagatti River.

When I saw the debris—pieces of wood, uprooted trees and broken branches—speeding along with the rushing waters in the river, my heart began beating wildly. Nobody should get hurt. Everybody should reach home safely. I started worrying. Should I talk to the gowda? When I had passed my matriculation, I was forced by my father to go along with him to gowda's house to pay my respects. The gowda told me not to study further and said that he'd find me a job at the ACC cement factory in Shahabad. I didn't listen to him and came to Gulbarga and joined college. His view was that nobody should study more than his children. My father had reprimanded me many times saying that I should stop studying and do as the gowda says. But I stuck to my decision. The Malagatti River was drawing near. If I attempt to speak with the gowda, he might say something nasty. The gowda knew my nature so he too kept his mouth sealed and just walked behind me.

We reached the bank of the Malagatti River. We stopped there. I looked at my watch. It was 6.30. Soon, our people came in swimming and pulled the raft to the shore. Father and his two brothers carried Ningammagowdathi and her brother from the raft and brought them to the riverbank. I saw the faces of my people … the happiness … relief … bliss … the glow on their faces … they were beaming as if they had won a kingdom.

The gowda who had been worrying about whether or not his daughter would reach safely was now relieved. I had been worrying whether something untoward would happen to the people of my keri. Now that worry was gone. Father said to elder brother, 'Basantha, you carry the gowdathi on your shoulders. I will carry the young gowda on mine. The path is full of slush and mud. They can't walk on this.' Before he could finish, my brother had hoisted Ningamma-gowdathi onto his shoulders. Father had her younger brother on his shoulders. They both walked in front and the others walked behind them. Till we reached the village, people were shouting aloud praises to God and their voices reached the skies …

By the time we reached the village, the entire population had congregated at the Hanuman temple. All of them looked at Ningamma-gowdathi and exclaimed, 'Our mother has come … the daughter of our village has come … our treasure has come.' I wanted to know the secret of their happiness and walked along with them to the gowda's house listening to these exclamations. It was nearing seven and the sun was setting. Darkness was falling. In the sky, the stars were slowly making their appearance, to provide some light in this boundless darkness.

The rain had stopped completely. Drumming and shouting praises to the gods, the villagers carried Ningamma-gowdathi to light lamps at the Shankaralinga temple in the myageri, the Malagatti Hirodyaana at the kurubas' keri and the Hanuman temple outside the village and returned to the gowda's house. The gowda was sitting on the platform on his veranda. The others were on the ground. Everyone was waiting for tea to be served. While they were bringing Ningamma-gowdathi and her brother home, they had ensured that not a drop of water splashed on her nor were her feet allowed to be stained by the slush and mud. My people looked as if they were celebrating this achievement with great happiness. I started thinking, how will my poor, ignorant people understand my tense engagements with Samkhya, Charvaka, Mimamsa and Buddhist philosophies?

Devanoora Mahadeva

‘I am not so active any longer. I do express my feelings in debates but only when it becomes inevitable. It is true that this often makes me an active participant. But these actions are always accompanied by immense conflict and unrest inside me. This intensity may be one reason why I write so little …’ Devanoora Mahadeva said during a discussion with us in his modest and beautiful Mysore home designed by the artist Shivaprakash. He was responding to our observation that he continues to be an influential presence in all the important Kannada debates.

‘Despite the intensity with which I get involved in things, my memory is poor, so I don’t usually tell life stories but since you ask, let me try,’ he continues. Mahadeva was ‘born on a Monday in 1948’ and spent the early years of his childhood in his mother’s village, Chikkakavanthe, where he studied up to class three. ‘Even though I left this place so early and have few memories of it, the language of my writing is the language of this village,’ he points out.

When his father, a police constable, was transferred, the family moved to Anupapura, where Mahadeva continued his schooling and from there to Devnooru for high school. As a young boy, he read the usual children’s magazines, like *Gokula* and *Chandamama* and several detective novels. He moved to Mysore for his PUC studies in science, and attended Maharaja’s College. He failed in the science stream and moved to Yuvraja College for his BA. Mahadeva wrote his first story in 1967, around the time he failed PUC. It is titled ‘Kathalu Thiru’, which can be translated as ‘twists in life’. He was influenced, he says, by Besagarahalli Ramanna who also writes about the village life.

In high school, he joined an RSS unit, drawn by their ‘Hindu ondu’ (Hindus are one) slogan—an association that was to continue through his PUC years. ‘I joined, assuming there was equality but what I found was brahmin culture, stories and practices that create hatred towards Muslims, displeasure at inter-caste marriages and, overall, a philosophy of hatred. Later, I also came to be influenced by the socialist philosophy.’ Mahadeva left the RSS during his BA years and joined the socialist Samajvadi Yuvajana Sabha. He was introduced to socialist writing by the short-story writer Su Ramakantha and inspired by the thinking of the celebrated rationalist Nanjundaswamy and by the advocate and socialist T.N. Nagaraj. From 1973 onwards, while he was studying for his MA (which he completed in 1974), Mahadeva, along with Nanjundaswamy and George Fernandes, was active in building the socialist movement

in tandem with the work Jayaprakash Narayan was doing in the north. They brought out the Lohiaite journal *Manvantha*. From 1975 to 1989, Mahadeva was a lecturer at the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore. Bored by institutional life, he resigned the job in 1989 and took up farming.

Mahadeva's writing career, on the other hand, remained a constant. His second story, 'Marikondavaru' (Those Who Sold themselves), written while he was a first-year BA student and published in *Sankramana*, a journal run by the playwright and poet Champa, made him something of a celebrity. He even received letters of appreciation addressed to 'Devanoora Mahadeva, Professor of Kannada'. 'The response was tremendous. It gave me confidence,' he says with disarming simplicity. Around this time, he wrote three more stories. 'It was a turning point for me,' he says. 'Dambaru Bandudu' (Tar Comes) is his favourite story: 'It's one in which the formal structure and the writer's handiwork is least obtrusive.'

The Navya movement was at its peak in the 1960s and '70s. Mahadeva was associated with all the major Navya writers, even though he distances himself from them. 'Maybe there is a Navya sensibility in my writing but the outlook, approach, content are all different. Tejaswi's *Abachurina Post Offisu* [the short story collection that marks the beginning of the Bandaya, or protest, literature movement in Karnataka] may have been a more significant influence.'

The discussion turns to the question of the village and writing about the village. Mahadeva speaks about the lack of a usable tradition of writing about the village and the sort of challenges it poses for writers. 'The language from "Tar" onwards is my mother tongue, the language and sensibility of my mother's village. But it is not simply a reproduction, there is a blending, a double presence, both in the language and the narration,' he clarifies.

In 1973, while still an MA student, he wrote 'Amasa'. The response to that came like a tidal wave. His classmates organized a seminar on the story and it was widely reviewed and discussed. It was not long before the story found its way into university syllabi in Karnataka and elsewhere. Despite the smallness of his oeuvre—just over a hundred pages at the time—Mahadeva was recognized as a major Kannada writer. With the publication of *Kusumabale* (the name of the novel's female protagonist) in 1984, that position was consolidated. *Odalala* (Innards/The Heart of Hunger), a forty-page story that many regard as his masterpiece, and some as a classic of world literature, was completed in 1984. 'The story has the feel of Vaikom Mohammed Basheer's *Pathumayude Adu*,' Mahadeva says. G.S. Amur called it one of the ten best novels in Kannada. As of 2011, 30,000 copies of *Kusumabale* and 50,000 of *Odalala* have been sold. Mahadeva was elected president of the State Bandaya Sahitya Sammelana in

1974. In 1990, *Kusumabale* received the Sahitya Akademi Award. In 1995, the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi honoured him for his achievements in literature.

'Writing sets up a world, makes a picture for me. It speaks to me, touches me. It is not only cerebral. My writing is not a message for someone else; my reader is really only myself. While writing, I try to become the other being—writing about a stone, I try to become a stone and bring that into the picture. Writing is a lonely and somewhat subconscious phenomenon but it communicates, or so it seems! Is this a literature of the dalit movement? I cannot say that with any confidence or certainty. Initially my readers were not dalits; today they are also dalits,' he observes. His observations apart, it would not be wrong to say that his writing gave the dalit movement legitimacy in the mainstream literary world: 'The manifestation of the pain and artistic energy of the dalits, together with his love for humanity and concern for the orphaned downtrodden, has created a new idiom and a new sensibility in Kannada. Language becomes soft as wax, just as stone becomes a living medium in the hands of Hoysala sculptors,' a commentator notes, adding, 'Devanoora's writings explore new possibilities of expression and expands the scope of Kannada narrative.'

The conversation moves seamlessly to political questions. Mahadeva tells us that, in 1974, 'the socialist movement broke up into two streams: the farmer's movement and the dalit movement. What formally became the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS) in 1976 included both the Marxists and the Ambedkarites. All writers, irrespective of their castes and irrespective of whether they were socialists, communists or Periyarites, supported the DSS. We had a strong bonding and the brotherhood was not disturbed by our differences. A kind of tolerance, understanding, wisdom was alive in the Karnataka movement at that time. In Hassan district, for example, different castes came together to take over government land and live there together. So many rare experiments took place in those days.'

Discussing the importance of Ambedkar within that political scene, he says, 'The spirit of our admiration for Ambedkar is simple; an identity icon. But his writings are scholarly, legal, difficult to read. What he stands for is a message. The writing is cerebral; his existence, its iconic value, is a matter of the heart. All those quarrels about caste or class are large, distant discussions about a simple question.' And with that, he returns to his account of the 1970s and '80s: 'There were also many debates. About boycotting elections, for example. A few other activists and I did not believe that we should boycott elections; voting gives a movement a certain dynamism. The landless and women had no vote in many countries. They had to fight for it. Then there was the question of non-violence—and the question of dalits and the Congress. At that time, the dalit votes were with the Congress. We took an anti-Congress stance during the Emergency. People finally accepted it, even if it was difficult to convince them. A third

question arose with regard to support for the BJP. The problem was that we did not have the maturity to handle politics. Today there are many aspiring leaders and many splits.'

Devanoora Mahadeva describes himself as 'actively involved for over four decades in the socialist movement and for over three decades in the dalit movement in Karnataka'. He is president of Sarvodaya Karnataka, a political party that was formed through the union of the Karnataka Rajya Raita Sangha and dalit groups. For the past five years, the party has been trying to explore an alternative political system.

Susan Daniel, translator of the excerpts from *Odalala* and *Kusumabale* that we carry here, describes the former as 'the story of Sakavva, the mother figure and head of a poor dalit household. Her faith in herself and her family in the face of exploitation and caste oppression sets her out as heroic. Writing about the Irish language, W.B. Yeats observed, "One has to find expression in it or exploit it." Mahadeva seems to have done both with the Nanjangud dialect." *Kusumabale* recreates in epic style the story of three generations. This poetic novel has at its centre the theme of an illicit affair between Kusuma, an upper-caste girl, with Chenna, a dalit boy. The birth of a child brings the relationship out into the open. While the village is readying for the annual fire-walking festival, Chenna's relations fearfully await his return. Chenna is murdered. Alongside these events, Chenna's relative Thooramma is struggling to bring to life her niece Eeary's wasting child.'

The chapter on the ritual Eeary performs with Thooramma's help, translated here, is a probing and deeply moving story of childhood starvation. 'Tar Comes', on the other hand, is an elemental account of Indian modernity as seen through the eyes of village dalits. Daniel describes the significance of *Kusumabale* thus: 'This hauntingly poetic prose, layered with janapada [popular/people's] traditions, echoes of world literature and the imaginative space of the everyday in a dalit's life, leaves us with the amazing experience of being in the middle of an aesthetic tradition, which in reality is only now finding its voice.'

Tar Comes

Translated by Manu S. Shetty and A.K. Ramanujan

An Overview of the Village

The dirt track that's just good enough for a bullock cart to amble along starts like an alley from the village and winds for three miles before joining the main road on which buses ply. Back from the main road, the route dips down to the village and, hedged in on both sides by cacti, meanders around the banyan grove in which the spirits reside, forks into three and then runs into the village. On either side of the forked alleys are houses that stand so close together that, at first sight, they seem to choke each other.

It is not a village that's known for anything. If one counts, there would at most be some eighty households. There's not even a little hotel there, like everywhere else. You can judge the place from that. And then there are some four young men who have studied up to high school, either at neighbouring Nanjangud or Mysore. Lakuma, Rajappa, Madu and Shambu are their names.

The relation between the above names and the story to be told is as follows: the village patel doesn't exactly like these characters. After all, who could suffer these twits, born before one's own eyes, strutting around with their heads held high? It's always the same story, right since our fathers' times. These boys, heedless of upper caste or lower caste, run around with that holeya Lakuma as if they were born of the same womb. They had been warned through their fathers. You think they'd listen to their fathers? Everyone is waiting for those boys to be caught harassing some girl. That will be an opportunity to drag them to the village hall, strip them down to their underpants, tie them to a pole and flog them. There is the hope that the boys will certainly oblige.

A Road Is Ordered

It was during such times that the order sanctioning a road for the village came from above. The patel's ample body puffed up even more. The news spread through the village like wildfire. It may be recalled in this connection that, some seven or eight years ago, when the minister had visited the village, the patel had personally garlanded him and handed him a lemon and had said that a village worth its name should at least have a road and had pleaded with the honourable minister to be magnanimous and sanction one. It was evening by the time the patel returned from Nanjangud that day. He brought the news that he himself was to be the road contractor and that, from then on, for months together, no one needed to look around for work and also that, with the excess government money, the village temple was to be renovated. Every house in the village was agog with all this news.

In Front of the Village

It's been many days now since all this has happened. Now the village is a regular battlefield. The banyan trees that once stood spread against the sky, as high as the eye

could see, have all been razed to the ground. To those who remember a village that was hidden behind a dense mat of banyan trees, this must look like a desert. There's not even a trace left to show that the trees were once there. Where they once stood, there are now machines running around. At the sight of these machines, with stone wheels that reach man-high, moving around belching smoke, let alone the village kids, even the men and women forget themselves and watch fascinated. The clamour that rises from there spreads across the village and goes beyond. To anyone seeing the village from a distance, it will look like the site of some huge upheaval. But if you come closer, the people and the village are still what they were. If you talk to them, you will know them to be the same people. But they have changed beyond recognition—the black tar that is spread on the ground is also smeared all over them. The way they look! The way they move!

On one side, ten or fifteen young women sit with their saris tied around their heads and crush the gravel. One among them raises her thin voice and sings, 'Come, come soon, Chenna Basavayya.' Others prod her on, joining her in a chorus, which is heard even by those working at a distance. With the workers engrossed in their work, the whole place, for as far as a furlong, has a festive air about it. Measuring and digging, digging and levelling, levelling and sprinkling water, sprinkling water and bringing the blend of gravel and tar in a barrow and filling it in, filling it in and spreading it—all this on the other side. A machine that goes backwards and forwards. A dhug-dhug machine that levels. A fire-spitting machine that mixes the gravel, sand and tar together. For everything, a machine. How many of them! Each one a weird black-black form.

The patel is standing where the measuring is going on, with his hands folded in front of him. Suddenly he turns back. He takes a few steps forward. From the look on his face, even a child can see that the work is going well.

Hands and Mouths Tarred

Kids everywhere are the same. The moment they leave the hamlet, they gather around the tar. When the elders scold them, they retreat; when the elders turn away, they are back again. All the kids spend their evenings where the tar is melted. Even after night has fallen, they do not return to their houses. The elders have to come, spank them and take them back. But then, even the elders who come to take the kids away can't help spending at least a few moments watching the miracle of road-making before they go back. And if, while going home, they hold the hands of the kids, the tar from the kids' hands will smear theirs. That's what happened when Rangappa came to bring his son back. Angered, he spanked his son, asking: 'Is this what your master taught you in school?' The kid opened his mouth wide and started to cry. When Rangappa, losing patience, hit the kid on the mouth, the child cried even louder and put his hands into his

mouth. The tar on his hands stuck to his mouth. The mouth was sealed and the crying stopped. Many such things happened every evening.

And then, it has become a habit with the women to bring home a ball of tar when returning from work. Apparently, some woman tried to plug a leak in a pot with the tar and it worked like magic. Since then, in whichever corner of the village there is a leaking pot, the tar finds its way there. It has also become a practice to borrow tar from the households that maintain a ready stock of it.

A Letter to the Editor

The driver, who ran the big machine, commuted every day, back and forth from Nanjangud. One day, word spread that the paper he brought along with him carried news of the village. Everyone, instead of getting down to work, crowded around the driver. The patel was fuming. The news the paper carried about the village, read like this:

> Sir,
>
> This is with reference to the road that the government in its magnanimity has sanctioned to our village and the construction that is presently going on. We have learnt that the road contractor, who is also the village patel, plans to utilize government funds for the renovation of the temple. This is misuse of public funds. It is our prayer to the concerned authorities that they should ensure that no such thing takes place.
>
> Aggrieved

One cannot say with certainty whether or not the roadwork continued that day. Shall we say it went on like it didn't? What had started off as one thing had begun to turn into something entirely different. The fear about what might be the outcome of all this spread through the streets of the village. As evening approached, the plot grew thicker and thicker. The patel had the drummer announce that every household should send one person to the chavadi (village square) for a meeting. Night had just begun to fall and darkness enveloped the village. Outside, it was so dark that people couldn't see each other's faces. The dim light from within the houses fell out of the windows and was lost in the darkness.

The Chavadi

In the chavadi, the lantern spewed out abundant smoke and some light. Already a few men had spread themselves out as if they had nothing to do with what was going on.

People started dropping in one by one. As the crowd grew, so did the bustle.

In a moment, the din that rose from there began to drown the village. The patel was seated in the centre. The light from the lantern fell straight on his face. You could see it sweating lightly and his forehead rhythmically wrinkle, unwrinkle and wrinkle again. You could see who was sitting in which far corner as their faces lit up when they struck a match to light a beedi. There was such a mob of people there.

Man 1: Why don't you start?

Man 2: Everyone knows it. What is there to start, except the dressing-down?

Rajappa: What does that mean, brother?

Man 3: You are the ones who know about meanings and things like that. Have we gone to school, like you?

The shanbog (accountant, brahmin): Be quiet for a while. Patel, why don't you speak?

The patel: What is there to say?

The shanbog: Everyone knows that you are the ones who wrote the letter to disgrace the village. Are you people inclined to accept that?
(The shanbog looks at Lakuma, Rajappa, Shambu and Madu. They nod their heads as if to say yes. An uproar that pounds the chests of those standing outside looms from within.)

The patel: What wrong did you people see in that?
(The patel's words are heard like a crack. Not one opens his mouth.)

Rajappa: If you put the money that's meant for something into something else, what else did you expect?
(The clamour rises again. The shanbog waves his hand. The noise dies out gradually.)

The patel: Did I swallow the money for my children's sake? Or did I do it for the sake of the village and for God's work?

Madu: You might do it for anything, sir. You didn't use it for what it was meant for.
(The clamour rises again. This time louder than before. The shanbog, louder than the rest as usual. This time one or two men stand up.)

Man 1: Don't you fellows have anything like gods, elders and things like that?

Man 2: If they did, would they get into this business?

Man 3: Enough, keep quiet. Why does everyone have to say something?

Man 4: Flog them. That'll set them right. They will talk straight.

Rajappa, Shambu and Shambu's father: Who's that man? Come beat us then. We'll take care of that too. Your writ runs only till the tip of your nose.

The patel (*raising his voice*): Yes, sure. What you did was the right thing to do, I say.

Shambu: And you think what you did is right. What's the point of this discussion?

The patel: What did you say? You have the audacity to talk back to me like that! Have I become so decrepit as to just stand here and take it from you?

So saying, the patel clenched his fist and stood up like a shot. His head hit the lantern and broke the glass; the pieces fell tinkling to the ground. The lantern flickered until it finally died out, plunging the whole place into darkness. Pandemonium ensued. Everyone struggled to get out of the chavadi as soon as possible. It went on like this for a while, then everything was quiet. The houses in the village shut their doors.

News from Hosur

The village slept, dreaming perhaps of what had happened the previous night. As if to spoil the dream, a man from neighbouring Hosur passed by in the early hours of the day. The words he left behind began to creep along the alleys of the village:

> Sir, I am from Hosur. In our village, there was a dirty woman. It was her practice to seduce all the teenaged boys of the village. How long could one try to talk her out of it? She paid no heed. They tried scolding her but she ignored them. Finally they did what had to be done. They called the Village Council meeting and dragged her there. Even there she was her usual arrogant self. Furious, they didn't leave it at that. They stripped her and flogged her with a tamarind branch and made her rue the day she was born.
>
> Yet, she wouldn't let it go at that. She carried the same face straight to the police station. They say she told the police everything in detail: they did this to me, they did that to me. The police van arrived and rounded up all the landlords. Nobody knows what happened after that.

The news from Hosur blended with what was already brewing in the village, and the ferment rose higher and higher. They talked of what had happened.

The patel: Hmm.

The shanbog: Ha.

The foursome Oh my god! They were lording it over. Now they've been shown their place.

Man 1: Ayyo, Shiva!

Tar in the Pit, in the Pitch of the Night

But things didn't stop there. Remember the tar drums that had been heated and kept in front of the village? The next morning, they were not to be seen. If you followed their trail, it led you outside the village. They had been arranged around a pit where, with their mouths wide open, they were spewing out tar in thick lumps. As the sun rose higher and higher, the tar continued pouring out into the pit, stretching gently out of the mouths of the drums. Those who had gathered around to see, kept watching. Those who hadn't seen it yet, came to see it in flocks. After they had watched and watched, and the blackness of it had filled their eyes, they would slowly move away. Nobody had a word to say.

Even the patel didn't have a word to say. One man said to the patel, 'You should have just said yes, we would have beaten the daylights out of them last night.' Even at that, the patel only clenched his teeth. Didn't say a word. He went to the police station straight from there. It was evening when he came back. It became known that, the next day, early in the morning, the police would come to carry out the investigations and that no one could now say what turn it would all take.

The One Who Went to the Hamlet Hasn't Returned

As one thing led to another and the plot grew darker and darker and as the village waited for night to fall, there was yet another thing that would come to pass. Although it was dusk and every house had closed its door, and there was not a soul stirring in the streets, Rangappa's kid still hadn't come back home. Apparently he had headed towards the hamlet after lunch. They asked the schoolmaster who said he had seen the boy walk homewards. He was the kind of dumb kid that headed straight to wherever he was going. With a lantern in hand, they knocked at every house in the village. They asked his playmates. No one had seen him. Not a single street, not a single alley was left unsearched. How long could this continue? His mother's cry was the only sound in the silent village, and she wailed through the night.

Investigations

At dawn, the police van came bumping along with difficulty and stopped in front of the village. The inspector sent off a man who was standing around to bring the patel along. The patel hurried out to the spot. Everyone gathered around the pit outside the village to look and froze the moment they saw. The tar in the pit had trapped Rangappa's kid and the tar drum had both his hands. His hands, his body and face were all covered with tar. And if you took a closer look, in that child's body, there was life still throbbing.

Innards[1]

Excerpt from Chapter 4
Translated by Susan Daniel

From a house here and a house there that sent up smoke, sounds of cooking pots rose and fell and stopped at Sakavva's ears like an invitation. Sakavva called out to Shivu. As soon as Shivu arrived, 'Come son, we'll go look for my rooster,' she said. Dragging his feet with an 'anh' and an 'oohm', Shivu said, 'If the rooster were' round, it would've come … now it's this dark … I'm scared grandma, you go …'

Sakavva, who sat with her legs outstretched, replied, 'Why, I'm here, aren't I?'

'What if you are … ?'

'Even God Yama'll run off, boy!'

Shivu couldn't get this into his eyes. He stared back like a dope.

Seeing this, Sakavva said, 'He has them … moustaches, thick as a banyan tree … teeth, as wide as that landlord's doorway …'

'Then s'pose he drags you off?'

'Aiy … come now … "Why drag me, you fools, I'll come by myself, you walk ahead," I'll say …'

'… and then?'

'Then before they do, I'll reach the land of Yamadharmaraja on my own and …'

As these words left Sakavva's mouth … her quivering wrinkled skin, the toothless mouth in her face and her grey hair vanished. Shivu's aunt Puttagowri entered Sakavva's body.

‘Now what does Yamadharmaraja do?’

‘Ah, he … ? Sitting on a throne the size of our whole huddle of huts … he punishes the ones that Yama’s messengers haul in …’

‘And you aren’t afraid … even of that?’

‘Aiy … come now … compared to the troubles I’ve put up with on this earth, what’s that punishment? I’ll say the same to him, son …’

Sakavva, who had become Aunt Puttagowri, is now a sylph in a white sari, her hair blowing in the breeze.

‘Then what’ll … what’ll he say to that?’

‘To that he’ll … “Alright old hag, I’m taken in by your courage … what’s it you want, ask for a boon,” he’ll say.’

The sylph in the white sari, her hair wafting in the breeze, is now playing coyly with the earth atop her little finger.

‘And after he says ask for a boon?’

‘Well to that I’ll say, “Look lord, grant that my grandson rule on earth … that’ll do,” I’ll say.’

Shivu pondered this.

Then breaking up Shivu’s reverie, ‘Now let’s go look for my rooster, come child,’ she said.

Shivu stood up.

Then Sakavva said, ‘Go, get a tumbler [glassu] from your mother.’

Tumbler in hand, Shivu’s mother came out, ‘That which has gone, is gone, why stagger and stumble around in the dark, maw?’

Pressing one hand down on the ground, Sakavva lifted herself up and holding onto her walking stick, replied, ‘You just hand me that tumbler. Gone is gone? Where to? Now say it’s gone … what I’ll do is … I’ll smoke those dry red chillies in front of my household god and then beat him left and right, that’s what I’ll do. Think I’ll let him off?’

Saying this, she held on to Shivu, who stood just there, tumbler in hand. With Sakkavva leaning on her stick, they fell into the humming dark.

Leaning on her stick and holding onto Shivu’s hand Sakavva walked in the dark, stopping at every hut she crossed. She’d stop and sniff, pulling in a deep breath. After testing the air for smells, she’d walk on. In this manner she covered ten huts, then twenty and if anyone asked, ‘Who’s there?’, she’d say, ‘It’s me, good man.’

If they said, ‘What’s it, Mother?’, she’d say, ‘Just passing by,’ and walk on.

Although her legs ached and her nostrils couldn't trace even a whiff of anything from second-wife Kempamma's house, Sakavva worried and walked. At long last, a strong aroma dragged Sakavva right up to the front door of a hut.

It was the hut of one Parvathaiah. Parvathaiah and Sakavva were related in some roundabout way. Sakavva knocked on the door.

'Who's in?' she called out.

Parvathaiah's wife Deviramma opened the door, 'Come, Mother, come in … what has brought you?' she asked.

Sakavva drew in her breath and entered. Parvathaiah was busy having a meal.

Turning to Deviramma, Sakavva said, 'There's this half a measure of rice left over from the Mari festival, dear. I've cooked it up for my grandson. Around our huts, no one has cooked yet, that's why I've come this far, my dear, just to get two drops of uduka from your hut.'

Deviramma brought out a little watery curry and poured it into the tumbler in Shivu's hands.

Then with a, 'I'll see you, my child,' Sakavva stepped outside and held the tumbler to her nostrils. Then pulling a piece of something out of the uduka she gave it to Shivu. 'Eat, see if it's meat, child.'

Shivu chewed on it and said, 'It's not meat, grandma, it's mushroom.'

Puzzled yet still unwilling to give up, Sakavva then went on with her raid on the smells from the remaining huts. Finally, weak and worn, she arrived back at her own.

There, standing under the eaves of the hut were Cheluvamma and their neighbour Kalakka.

When Sakavva and Shivu went in, Kalakka said, 'Sister-in-law, I'll ask you something … don't say no."

To this Cheluvamma said, 'Say it woman, think I'd lie to you and say there's nothing here?'

'It's nothing much, sister-in-law. I put the pot over the fire before I came here. To be honest, there's really not enough flour and the millet ball's going to end up soft. Give me a quarter measure of flour and I'll give it back to you when I return from the mill tomorrow.'

Clapping her hand to her forehead, Cheluvamma said, 'I swear on my eyes there's nothing over here, sister. If there was any, would I say there's none?'

In the dark, no one could see Kalakka's face. Cheluvamma then closed the door behind her and went in.

Sitting in the place she always sat, Sakavva wagered on, ‘My god,’ she said, ‘at the end of it all I still didn’t find it, Shiva, God! How I struggled to rear it. Aiyo … you my household god … damn you, you son of a … what were you doing, haan? Sitting around with your eyes open … or were your eyes shut?’ She clamoured on and on.

The sick kid over there was tasting the uduka in the tumbler and licking it.

Kusumabale: An Excerpt

Translated by Susan Daniel

Ah la la—ah, how it shook and bumped, Thooramma’s hut, palm-leaf thatch and all else. Over there, following Thooramma’s gestures, Eeary’s hands were working away. As they did now, grinding spices and masala. Now to the smells that rose from there—dank smells of floors just washed and wet with cow-dung paste—and just over there was the head of a rooster lying a little apart from its body, severed. The body’s in no flutter, seeing that a few drops of water were trickled into its beak before it was cut but the tardy little life left in muscle and tendon fluttered and flitted one last time before leaving. And in a bowl that held the rooster’s blood, the blood beginning to clot, a few crystals of salt strewn over it sat without dissolving. In front of all this, those incense sticks that were lit ’n’ burning on, this scent now joined the smells of masala and dung. Then, when Eeary plucked the rooster clean and seared it over the fire, the onrush of smells was such that it would pierce the nostrils, smearing over all that breathed over there, all that over there.

With the smells playing around on this side, Eeary, her ritual bath over, her head touched with holy ash and vermillion and observing a fast, her hair combed like never before, the castor oil she’d used gently oozing and smoothing over her cheek, her red hair-ends combed and tied into a knot seemed like a live coal, and on top of what seemed like a live coal, three flowers sat a-smiling.

The mother thus prepared, the son gets a bath in hot water, its hollow bones covered over with holy ash. Fatigued by this, keeps to itself, its face to the wall, as if it smelt none of the smells wafting around there.

Eeary filled love into her piety, and scrubbed the copper bowl that, when full, could feed ten men …

Having scrubbed it to a gleam, she drew three lines with holy ash around the outer rim of the bowl. Then she lit incense sticks to it and, folding her hands in prayer,

touched her forehead to the ground and prostrated. Carrying all she'd cooked and curried to the copper bowl, she lifted and pressed it to her eyes.

Placing them, one by one—the parboiled rice, like blossoms, then only just enough to stir in with the rice the smell-good uduka, to top it a palmful of liver, kidney and tender meat, beside it a pot overfull of payasa—and the copper bowl now nearly brimful, she makes room for the bun and rose-petal jam that was brought.

Now coming to the front door, the burning castor oil lamp held in both hands, and her mind set firm on the ritual, she places betel leaves and areca nut on top of the food; and on top of that the burning lamp. Eeary bustled this way and that, and seeing Thooramma nodding at how well she had learnt the rite, Eeary is triumphant in her joy.

Covering that copper bowlful of food with a newly made wicker basket, Eeary now rises and picks up coals for the arati of incense. Then onto the live coals she puts incense, the smoke from the incense huff-puffing around. Holding it in both her hands, she circles it once over the hearth that gave of the coals and, touching her forehead to the ground, worships. To the pot of holy water tied with turmeric threads she raises the arati, bows and prostrates, then rising she comes over to the copper bowl. Here she raises the arati again and bows low. By now, Eeary has broken into a sweat. Then bringing in that arati of incense, setting it before the cloth wet with holy water, she prostrates again. Next, rising, comes to her offspring and, stroking its head, calls out 'babe'. It opens its eyes. 'I'll just step out and be back. Under that basket I've something covered, if your belly is hungry, you can eat, my darling,' she says. It nods. After this, Eeary hides herself, like Thooramma, and plants her eyes on her child. And then …

Say it waited another moment—yet the large gut playing as if it would swallow the small, and no sign of his mother's return. Eeary's boy lifts its head. Eeary's boy, who couldn't raise its head, now pulls itself up and sits.

Now Eeary's boy, who'd picked himself up, harkens back to his mother's voice, and the sounds coax his ears and eyes and drag him to the basket. But the effort of lifting the basket with the might of both his hands all but takes his breath away.

Yet, even that played out breath now gazing at the empire of food spread out in the copper bowl, he is overcome with joy. Those wide-open eyes open all the wider, and wide-eyed, it sees a leaf spread over the empire and, squatting on it is the lamp-mother, glowing!

Those eyes peel open, open all the wider. The sweat from that body—from where did all that sweat flow? It tears out and splashes down. The boy, all eyes now, is looking. His sweat, tearing away and splashing. Joy from looking at the bowl brimful, filling the boy's eyes. The joy that filled his eyes, now spilling over, filling his body. And joy is now the child's face. This joy then reaching into the watchful eyes of mother-

eeary and grandmathooramma standing there with bated breath, and with this gaining on that, those bodies too are now joyful.

Then joyfully gazing at the empire of food before it,
will I eat of it, or will I clothe myself, it muses.
Ah, how wide those eyes!
Yet that body too faint to feast, now all a tremble,
a trembling finger dips into the smell-good curry,
the finger from the curry reaches the tongue,
the tongue smacks noisily and sends the finger off for payasa.
And with a chuckle it licks at that payasa that comes back stuck
then reaching into the gulkand jam over here and
rolling that rose-petal jam on its tongue, it then
reaches for bits of liver, heart and kidney and sucks on it
and the life blood now smoothing through those bones
and wondering what to eat next, but
not knowing what to next … not knowing what to,
that body loses its sense,
and senseless, it slumps over on its side. Thooramma
rushes forward groping and the watchful Eeary
still watching from there, ah, she stood still.
As it waited for the life juices to flow through those bones,
death devoured those bones in other ways.
The wealth of that empire of food cast in that copper bowl
is now set deep in the child's eyes, and Eeary's child's face
is all of a smile. Then seeing that smile on that face
that purposeful Death leaves—that open mouth open,
those wide-open eyes wide open, and it walks.
And then—

Who are the ones who came. Who are the ones who left. Who knows who came.
Someone gathered up those bones. Someone ritually bathed them clean.

Someone carried it and, shifting it from shoulder to shoulder, some people walked with it.

Someone buried it. Buried it and returned! Then, in front of Eeary, a smile smeared on her face, someone placed a pot of holy water with three betel leaves.

Someone else lit incense before that brass pot. As the smoke floated around, someone placed a mirror next to that pot.

That mirror, in it Eeary's face, set fair with a smile. And that mirror, it kept showing that smile.

Untouchability: Great-Grandfather of Apartheid[2]

Translated by Rajendra Chenni

I am a member of the National Committee on Racism constituted by the Government of India, but the opinions I am placing before you are my own.

First of all, I would like to remember with gratitude that the United Nations persisted in its effort to bring an end to apartheid and the racial discrimination laws of the South African government, and also that India took an active part in this effort. With the cessation of the apartheid laws in South Africa, the dignity of the whites, who had dwarfed themselves by giving a legal shape to racial discrimination and segregation, was enhanced. It became possible for the blacks, who had been the victims, to breathe freely, and it was a step towards equality.

The Third World Conference of the United Nations on Racism and Racial Discrimination is soon going to be held at Durban in South Africa. This conference instead of using the term 'race' in the restricted sense, indicative of physical characteristics as used by popular anthropologists, has rightly conceived it in the broad sense. That is, the conference conceptualizes only one race—the human race. It has also paid attention to the removal of institutional discrimination within the human race. All discrimination by descent has been included under the purview of the conference.

The untouchables were the 'thrown-outs' of the four-varna system when it existed; the untouchables were the ones who were thrown out of the caste system as outcastes. Therefore, it is only natural that the problems of the untouchable community in India—excluded from the social system because of birth, subjected to discrimination, differentiation, exclusion, prevention and restriction and obliged to take up 'lowly' professions—should be discussed at the World Conference. But the Government of

India is not agreeable. It argues that 'discrimination by descent' has to be interpreted as pertaining only to race-related discrimination in the narrow, restricted sense that is 'bound to physical characteristics' as used by popular anthropologists. If we accept the government's argument, we would be rejecting the United Nations' concept that 'there is only one race—the human race'. This is the crisis before us.

Let us set aside for the moment the debate on terms. When we compare apartheid, the discrimination practised in South Africa by colour and colonization, with untouchability —the discrimination prevalent in India arising out of the caste system—the similarities are shocking. Some of the rules and laws enacted by the white South African government between 1948 and 1990 in order to subject the blacks to prevention, discrimination, differentiation, exclusion, restriction and segregation are as follows:

- Law segregating the dwellings and schools of the blacks.
- Law preventing marriage between blacks and whites.
- Law barring the blacks from public places such as hotels and clubs.
- The rule that the black should possess a pass.
- The law dividing the blacks into three distinct groups, very much like the division of the Indian untouchables into sub-castes.
- The abolition of political rights, etc.

Didn't very similar laws and rules prevail in India during the reigns of the kings? Were the laws of the Indian kings not meaner towards the untouchables than any apartheid laws? Apartheid laws at least made provision for separate schools for the blacks. In India, it was a punishable crime for the untouchables and shudras to obtain an education. In the past, administration meant the strict and total adherence to, and imposition of, the varna system and the caste system.

Because South African apartheid is a recent and raw wound, we can still see it bleeding. Thousands of blacks were massacred for protesting against the discriminatory apartheid laws. Tens of thousands of people had to rot in prisons. When protests intensified, even the congregation of a few blacks became a punishable crime. In short, all that happens when the law itself turns criminal happened. Whenever I think of this horror, I feel that the repression, cruelty, violence and killings that would have been carried out in ancient India—in the throwing out of an entire community of people from the varna and caste system and in making them accept and comply with untouchability—was repeated in South Africa recently in the form of apartheid.

Perhaps you know about the kheda operations used in trapping elephants. They dig a huge ditch in the forest and make it invisible by covering it with sticks, leaves and branches. Then, they create a loud noise forcing the elephant to run towards the ditch. Unable to see the ditch, the elephant falls into it. After that they put shackles round the

trapped elephant and, thus chained, the elephant is lifted up and tamed through beatings and torture. The tamed elephant then forgets its natural character and becomes the humble servant of the one who tames it. Servitude itself becomes its nature. The elephant called the black in South Africa was pushed into the ditch and chained. Attempts were made to tame it through violence and torture. But this elephant, the African black, could not be tamed. Perhaps it had to face greater violence because it refused to be tamed enough.

The elephant called the Indian untouchable has been tamed. Since it was tamed in ancient times, we do not see the cruelty of it all. Even the one who tamed it doesn't remember today that he did so. The one who is tamed doesn't remember that he has been tamed. Discrimination has spread within our society and has come to be a natural custom. Which of the two is more tragic? How do we describe this? Shall we say apartheid was untouchability in its first phase, or shall we say that untouchability is the great-grandfather of apartheid?

If the apartheid laws of prevention and discrimination are allowed to prevail for thousands of years and allowed to become practices with the support of religion and scriptures, perhaps it would become untouchability. If one is required to point out the differences between the two, one difference stands out. In apartheid, it was possible to identify the victim because of the difference of colour between the whites and the blacks. But in the practice of untouchability, it was difficult to identify the victim because everyone, the perpetrator and the victim, had the same physical characteristics. This is why the customs and practices that were created to identify the untouchable seem to have crossed all limits of discrimination. In India, an entire discipline of knowledge evolved in order to identify the untouchable victim by dress, language, gait, the distance to be maintained from them, the foods that are eaten. Let me give you an example. This is a report from the 4 November 1936 issue of *Mumbai Samachar*. 'In a place called Ottapalam in Malabar, one Shivaraman, aged seventeen, belonging to the Ezhava untouchable caste, went to a shop owned by a caste Hindu to buy salt. He asked for salt in Malayalam. According to the customs of Malabar, only caste Hindus can use the word "uppu" for "salt". Being an untouchable, he should have used the word "pulichatan". The shopkeeper, angered by this, thrashed Shivaraman so soundly that he died.' There would be thousands of such incidents.

'Why rake up the past?' one may ask. We cannot say that discrimination ended in South Africa as soon as the apartheid laws were withdrawn in 1990. The havoc of discrimination created by discriminatory laws persists in that society even today. People generally follow customs and traditions more effectively than the laws of the land. In India, the situation is far more horrifying. For example, even though there is a law banning the practice of making untouchables carry night soil on the heads, doesn't

the practice still exist today? We can only say that the government, which is actually guilty, has absolved itself of its crime by withdrawing the discriminatory laws. Do you not think that if the government hides the discriminatory practices prevalent in society, it should be guilty of hiding a crime?

In South Africa, because there is documentary record of blacks who underwent loss and suffering, it is possible to seek compensation. In India, the problem of compensation may never arise. In fact, India faces greater challenges in solving the problem of untouchability because we have committed the sin of killing our conscience and abusing God, religion and the scriptures in order to make discrimination a part of our unconscious psyche. Here, religion has also been a culprit. Roman law declares that a slave is not a human being but Roman religion does not accept that law. In India, we have a history of religions themselves sanctioning discriminatory laws. Recently, the Shankaracharya, the religious head of the Puri Math, appeared to argue that untouchability is a scientifically valid truth. He thus converted a crime into a virtue. Perhaps such a mentality gave birth to the saying, 'Since the madiga died, ritual impurity has decreased.' Perhaps the same mentality did not allow unions to lead to unity in India even when marriages took place between different varnas. It made the child of a brahmin female and a shudra male an untouchable and cast it out of the society, thus reinforcing the separateness.

Just look at a comparison. In the United States, there are instances of whites bequeathing money for the education of blacks. In the Negro Yearbook published in 1931 we find references to one Garretson who gave 15 lakh dollars, Harkness who gave 12.5 lakh dollars and Tatton who left 1.66 lakh dollars for the education of the blacks. In addition, the Church also came forward to help educate black people. It is estimated that religious and humanitarian institutions spent 13.5 crore dollars for the education of the black people between 1865 and 1930. Of this, 8.5 crore dollars were donated by whites.

One cannot imagine such a thing happening in India. In a letter written in 1932 to Thakkar Bapa of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, Dr Ambedkar makes a plea that he should motivate the caste Hindus to allow untouchables inside their homes, at least by making them their servants (as the whites did to the blacks). Though this plea seems so pitiful, in the context of the Indian society, this is a step towards progress. Even today, in rural areas, the entry of an untouchable into the homes of caste Hindus is only a dream. In rural India, which covers three-fourths of the nation, the rules and practices of prevention, discrimination, exclusion, differentiation, restriction and segregation of the untouchables who are cast out of society are still living reality. When the untouchable community takes a small step towards equality and dignity, it arouses intolerance and violence. Murder and arson erupt. This is the terrible condition in which we live.

Mother India has become impure by nurturing untouchability in her womb. The sooner she is purified, the better for us. For this to happen, the Government of India, as a first step, should give up playing popular anthropologist and accept the UN spirit that there is only one race—the human race.

Dr Ambedkar and Gandhiji were of the same opinion on one issue. Both of them thought that untouchability is not the problem of the untouchables. The untouchables are only the victims of untouchability. That is, the problem lies with those who practise untouchability. But in present-day India, the sensitive writers, artistes, journalists, thinkers and honest people who constitute the conscience of India are keeping quiet, thinking that untouchability is the problem of the untouchables. This makes me sad.

H. Govindaiah

‘I am proud to think of myself as a poet. Being born in an untouchable caste, it seems a miracle that I got an education, came to an urban centre like Mysore, became a lecturer at the university, married a woman belonging to a “forward” caste and made Mysore my home. But thinking back on all these “achievements” doesn’t give me the sense of pride that my identity as a poet does. Rather, I feel that this casteist society has been pulling me in all sorts of directions, trampling me and snatching my life’s joys from me. When I think of myself as a poet, however, I don’t feel this bitterness. Instead, this pervasive feeling of untouchability fades away and I feel growing within me a pride in the freedom I have achieved. This strong transformative capacity of poetry mesmerizes me. I am quite sure that this is the reason behind my contentment in calling myself a poet,’ Govindaiah observes.

He was born in 1954 in Siddanahundi, a village inhabited only by madigas, which lies about thirty-five kilometres from Mysore. His father was a labourer bonded to a Muslim landlord. Govindaiah remembers him as always busy, working on the two-acre land contracted to him. But even that did not fetch enough to feed the family, so his mother also worked as a labourer on people’s farms.

‘When I stepped into the “world of learning”, the violence was overpowering. The neighbouring village, where people from all castes, including brahmins, lived, had a school meant for “everybody”. But we weren’t permitted to join it. We called this the Gangamma school. There was a separate school for the madiga colony—this was run in the Chennaiah temple, under big peepal and neem trees. The path to our school ran through the yard of the Gangamma school. The walk was always touched with terror. The question “Why a separate school for us?” yielded no answers; if anything, it only caused more fear for “letters”, learning and indeed “schools” themselves! So much so that I once decided to give up school and join Father as a bonded labourer. But I ran into my teacher on the way, and let myself be coerced back to school.

‘I completed my PUC in this atmosphere of fear and restlessness in 1971 and joined the Maharaja’s College in Mysore for my BA. That’s when I started trying my hand at poetry. Even though I wasn’t a student of literature, as I began writing, I got the feeling that poetry was the best thing for my bent of mind. Meanwhile, in 1973, B. Basavalingappa, a dalit minister in the Karnataka government declared, “Dalits should learn English to gain wisdom; all there is in Kannada is boosa.” This resulted in a huge

uproar in the world of Kannada literature—and in Karnataka in general. As if on cue, "forward" caste fanatics began attacking educated dalits all over the state. The boosa "controversy" looked like it would be the death blow to the barely formed dreams of dalit communities, who, aided by reservations, had just started to find their footing in the world of education. However, it also aroused anxious but fundamental questions about security, freedom and development. In this ferment, dalit minds began producing a strong literature in the form of stories, poems and speeches. The cold fire within an untouchable soul found expression in Devanoora Mahadeva's collection of stories, *Dyvanooru*, in 1973, and in 1975, *Holemadigara Haadu* by Siddalingaiah, who had egged us on with his slogan "Ikkrala Vadirla Aanannmakkla Cherma Ibbrala" (Bash them, Kick them, Skin Those Bastards!!), which set alight the embers of self-respect in the minds of the dalits.'

Support came from non-dalits also. Govindaiah specifically cites the convention organized by well-known socialist (Lohiaite) thinkers and writers in Kannada such as P. Lankesh, Poornachandra Tejaswi, U.R. Ananthamurthy, Aalanahalli Krishna, Chandrashekhar Patil 'Champa' and so on, who openly rejected brahminical literature and ideology.

'As a platform for the literary and rallying endeavours of dalits, my friends and I started a fortnightly magazine called *Panchama*, with me as the publisher. [The magazine functioned effectively for ten years until 1985, but gradually came to a stop as the DSS movement lost its energy.] As a result of all this, there were discussions and debates at the block and district levels throughout the state regarding the means to achieve the security, unity and freedom of dalits. Indeed, the boosa episode could be said to have inaugurated the dalit revolution in Karnataka. It is, after all, from this literary revolution—which doubled up as a social revolution—that today's famous dalit writers and poets in Kannada were born.

'The fact that my poem, "A Aaa Mattu" [A aa and], which was published during this time, drew everyone's attention and continues to be discussed in literary circles, has left me speechless. U.R. Ananthamurthy published this poem in the first issue of his literary journal *Rujuvaathu.* Thanks to literary critics, it was also included in the PUC textbooks for ten years, between 1984 and 1994. It continues to be used in the textbooks of several universities to this day. But of course, the fact that my name continues to be alive in literary circles—even though I do not have a published anthology to my name—has made me the target of much jealousy and criticism. It is true that I have not been able to write more than a handful of poems. Is this a result of my disinterest in poetry? Whenever I have asked myself this question, I have known that that is not true. If anything, I am a great admirer of poetry. I have argued that the religion of poetry is the

greatest of all. Why then have I not written enough poems to put together into an anthology? This is something that continues to intrigue me.'

Govindaiah completed an MA in economics in 1976, and worked as a lecturer, first in Mysore University and then in the Karnataka Open University for twenty-seven years, and as the deputy registrar of the latter for two years.

'But through all this, I was fated to see the very revolution we had built fall apart,' he observes. Govindaiah is unhappy with the use of caste as an identity basis for struggle. Dalits need to transmute the identity that the caste system assigns to them into a secular, creative, transformative one. That will be the basis of the new community, he believes. 'I firmly believe that this deterioration in the organization came about as a result of our holding on to the values of the caste system, rather than comprehending its dialectics. I have made very many sincere appeals to my revolutionary friends to understand this.' Govindaiah observes that those who have renounced dominant religious forms find that something is missing, something that will be the basis for spiritual creativity and community. 'A question is posed "to our beliefs". For this, I have been studying the pervasive ideas within India's mainstream traditions and indigenous philosophies since 1990,' he says.

'Some of my friends and I started a school called "Milind Vidyasansthe" in 1986 in Bailukuppe—a town on the border of Mysore and Kodagu districts. It begins with LKG and goes up to SSLC. About 500 children study in this school at the moment. My literary, social and cultural aspirations that have not found form also happen to be the aspirations of the school and the institution—and they are being realized here.'

A Aa And …

Translated by Tejaswini Niranjana

When I opened my eyes
and moved my limbs
in the dark nests of Mother's eyes
the stove was burning.
With his dark limbs warming at the fire
Father drew on his short beedi.
In the rice water he drank, many lives were bubbling.

When the little feet that had crawled to Mother's bosom
stood between the school's walls,
the moustache sprouting on Father's black cheek
stroked the earth as he fell at the naama-bearing[1] Master's feet.

Caught in the alphabets—'a', 'aa'—learnt in the darkness,
the hopes of my mother and father;
caught too the lanes and tombs of my village,
and words caught in the skeletons.

As I descended, seeking,
in answer to my questions emerged limbs
clad in khaki clothes.
Moustaches grew,
I melted into the dark.

But
On that day when I drew the letters—'a', 'aa'—
on the tattered walls of my inheritance, my father's hut,
the kisses my mother gave me on that day are still on my cheek. The coin with a hole my father gave me is still on my birth string.

A Letter to Father

Translated by Ankur Betageri

Father,
The application that I had submitted then
has earned me a job today.
Don't keep looking for me any more.
Don't ask the gowda to write

a ‘missing’ ad for the paper.
Tell Mother also not to cry. Tell her
I will be back home anytime now.

The job is in our village itself—
or in a surrounding one
(it’s not temporary, you see).
Until then the work here
is to build a dam,
generate electricity.
We plan to supply it to our village as well.
Salary will be paid in a lump sum,
after the dam is built.

When Mother was ill,
for the loan he gave—glaring derisively at me—
if the gowda insists that it be repaid
with bonded labour,
tell younger brother to ready himself
to go and drudge.
I too will come.
Tell the gowda … Father,
tell him without fail,
I will come and clear it.

Indudhara Honnapura

Indudhara Honnapura, one of the founder leaders of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS), recalls the early impetus for this lifelong commitment to dalit activism: 'I faced a lot of discrimination in school and had this urge to do something, but I had no idea how to go about it. I thought we would probably just have to continue suffering such humiliation.' Then, one day in 1971, a teenaged Indudhara saw a pamphlet published by the Samajwadi Yuvajana Sabha. It announced a conference on caste annihilation. 'I really identified with everything that was being said there and the meeting gave me enormous strength. I began working with the group.'

Born in 1954 in Honnapura, a village in Mysore district, Indudhara studied in the village school until class eight and moved to Mysore to complete his SSLC. His father, a schoolteacher, was keen that Indudhara become a doctor and forced him to take up science for his intermediate in Yuvaraj College. Although, he had little interest in studying science and did not want to be a doctor, he wrote the medical entrance examinations and got through. 'But I told my father that I had failed, and joined Maharaja's College for my BA, choosing to do Kannada, sociology and journalism. I had no idea what journalism was when I opted for it—I actually looked it up in the dictionary after I got home!'

Indudhara's career as a writer received a jump-start sometime in 1969. He wrote a short tale on caste discrimination and sent it to *Prajavani*, a leading Kannada daily. 'Imagine my surprise and delight when it appeared in print the very next week!' As a student activist, he took his journalism seriously, writing articles against superstitions and god-men in the little magazines *Andolana* and *Sankramana* that he and his colleagues published.

The divide in these debates and discussions was between brahmin and non-brahmin; the latter being the progressives and rationalists who came from all non-brahmin castes. But even they were reluctant, Indudhara recalls, to actively participate in the fight against untouchability. Around 1971–72, the dalits got together and brought out a journal, *Shoshit*, focusing on dalit issues. Eight pages of the journal were devoted to the reporting of caste-based atrocities. Six or seven issues of *Shoshit* were published. Unfortunately, when they tried to register it, they found that the name was not available so they opted for *Panchama*, which was cleared. Almost every major dalit writer began with a piece in *Shoshit* or *Panchama*. 'They used to say, "I want to write, but I don't

know how." Or, "If I write, will you publish?" The anxiety and the diffidence was so instructive! I used to reply, "What you have written is worth publishing," and then go ahead and publish it.'

Meanwhile, 'the dalit movement elsewhere was going from strength to strength,' Indudhara says.

'We had heard about the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra and read some of their writings. We contacted them and got a copy of their manifesto. Devanoora had it translated and we published and circulated it, especially among students. In fact, students were the main strength of the movement.

'There is also the story of writers' organizations. Against the backdrop of the 1974 boosa movement and the fights that had broken out following Basavalingappa's statement that existing Kannada literature was mostly 'boosa' [cattle-feed], we organized a gathering of rationalist and progressive writers in Karnataka, the Karnataka Barhagahararu Vakoota. Basavalingappa inaugurated the meeting. It was a huge success. Non-brahmin writers from all over Karnataka came and participated; Lankesh brought out a souvenir on the occasion, *Panchali*, which turned out to be a hot-seller. The Kannada literary establishment, which comprised entirely of brahmin writers, was truly shocked. Buoyed by the success of this conference, we held another equally well-attended one in Bhadravathi. Then we founded Daleka, Dalita Lekhaka Kalavidhara Sangam, which was mother to the more political and activist DSS.

'The formation of DSS was quite spontaneous. After one of the Daleka meetings, we gathered in one of our houses (Girappa's, if I remember correctly) for dinner. We wanted our movement to expand and encompass the whole state and also to take on the character of a social (as against a merely literary) movement. I remember Krishnappa was there, also Devanoora, Venkatesh and Chandra Prasad Tyagi. It was suggested that Devanoora should be president but we settled on Krishnappa, because he represented a group among the dalits, madiga, who were thought to be lower in the hierarchy. Girappa and Chandra Prasad Tyagi were the other office-bearers. The DSS constitution was based on the Dalit Panthers constitution. We wrote to all the districts. The movement spread like fire. Within a month, DSS meetings had been organized in many parts of the state and, in three or four months, we had touched every corner of Karnataka. Government colleges and social welfare hostels were the main centres of activity.

'I hardly attended classes, but the teachers gave me attendance and I also managed good marks. I was busy travelling and holding meetings. There were five or six of us doing this. We travelled without tickets, often standing in the toilet until the ticket collector passed. We had nothing: no social status, no money—but we were strong. What is more, we had wonderful communication. A ten-paisa postcard was enough to

get a thousand students to assemble. We were the first educated generation and were in many ways also symbols of self-respect.

'The DSS was not restricted to dalits. It was a broad forum with many people from the other backward castes. I would say that anyone who could be insulted by a reference to his caste can be thought of as a dalit. Washerfolk, barbers and so on would come under this category. In eight or nine districts, the DSS conveners were from other castes. In the first ten years or so, we would have to force people to become conveners. After that everything changed. There was competition—too much—for the leadership.

'Meanwhile, the Congress party began losing its strength in Karnataka generally and also among the dalits who had traditionally supported it. DSS had opposed the Emergency and that brought it closer to the Janata Party, which had a strong socialist cadre and an ideological orientation that was sensitive to the caste question.

'In 1978 we brought out a collection of poems named *Bandaya*. All dalit writers contributed, and many others as well. D.R. Nagaraj was a key figure in this initiative to bring rebel writers together. *Bandaya* was positioned against the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, which was seen as pro-establishment, anti-people and anti-dalit. In 1979, the Bandaya Sahitya Chaluvalli [Rebel Writers' Organization] was formed. It included dalits, socialists and progressive writers of different kinds. DSS provided the foundation for this important organization. Baraguru Ramachandrappa, Siddalingaiah and I were the first conveners. Ambedkar, Basava, Periyar were all inspirations and for almost two decades, the organization was very lively. Now it is only a skeleton of what it was.'

Around this time (1980–81), Indudhara stopped working full-time for the DSS and took up a job in *Prajavani*. He was the first dalit journalist in the paper—'people used to laugh at the idea,' he says—and distinguished himself by writing several hard-hitting and award-winning investigative reports. A couple of such reports led to the resignation of the ministers concerned. He put together a twelve-page supplement on the slums of Bangalore, wrote on tobacco cultivation and what it was doing to the soil, and about night soil carriers. The area he reported on in the night soil story was in Devaraj Urs's constituency and the article led to the introduction of flush toilets there. This sort of research-based journalism was not common in the Kannada press at the time. Until 1985, he continued to work in *Prajavani*. In 1985, restrictions were introduced in the functioning of newspapers. Dissatisfied with the new scenario, he left *Prajavani* and joined *Mungaru*, a daily set up by his friends, as executive editor.

The next move involved setting up the weekly, *Suddhisangathi*, in 1985. K. Ramaiah, Manglur Vijay and Shankar were the main people involved.They raised money by setting up shares. Devanoora Mahadeva was the first editor. The magazine was a big success, quickly running up a circulation of 64,000 copies and challenging the hold of

the other big magazines. But trouble arose on the commercial side. ‘We had given the agencies to dalits who had contacts and could distribute, but found it difficult to make collections. The magazine was a real success editorially as well as in terms of its reach and influence, but financially it was a failure. We somehow managed to keep it going until 1994, but then had to stop, having run up a debt of Rs 27 lakh. We requested the bank to waive interest, which it did, and with much difficulty, we managed to somehow clear the amount.’

In 2002, Indudhara joined Spoorthidama, a trust set up by a dalit official, S. Mariaswamy, which publishes the journal *Samvada* and organizes various programmes for intellectuals, social organizers and academics. The institution is doing good work, but Indudhara observes, ‘All over India, the dalit movement appears to be in a crisis. We have stopped thinking. There appears to be no step ahead. But I am not disappointed. So much has happened. For the “present generation” there are so many things that they have to put their minds to. Buddhism may be an alternative.’

We have translated here an early poem and a recent article, written as a response to a novel.

My Poem

Translated by S. Jayasrinivasa Rao

Doesn’t tell a story,
doesn’t play a tune.
Doesn’t make words dance
to the rhythm of music or drums.

Isn’t a ploy to impress the learned,
fool the ignorant, or
praise the cogitations of
impostors drunk on arrogance.

Isn’t impressed with the fragrance
of the soil that created history

but snuffed out hope.
Doesn't pay heed to the
pretensions of tattered-dhoti[1] moralists.

Exhorts life; opens up and shows
its throbbing, pining, eruptions,
and its cruel clutches.
Sows the anguish of my toiling and
productive brethren,
helps sprout new life voices.

My song!

What Is There in Hindu Dharma? What Does Hindu Dharma Have, Apart from Caste, Untouchability and Inequality?

Translated by Maithreyi K.R.

I write this article in pain and anguish. I was shaking with rage by the time I finished reading Bhyrappa's novel, *Mataantara* [religious conversion].[2] My eyes were wet. There was a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. It took me a long time to calm down. I have never before come across a popular writer who so utterly lacks social responsibility and can write in such a shameless and inhuman fashion about a socially relevant topic. Thoughts from his essay, *Aavarna*, also make their way into the novel, but he does not seem to have understood the nuances of the difference between a novel and an essay.

I do not dismiss all of Bhyrappa's arguments, reasoning and evidence as baseless or hollow. But the way he has used them, as a preface to a secret programme, is terrible. He gives the impression of a cunning lawyer who twists the law around in order to win a case.

Birth is arbitrary. But in the vedic religion, now called 'Hindu' religion, it is birth alone that is all-significant. The speciality of this religion is that birth decides who is

'higher' and who is 'lower'. And through this inability to treat fellow humans with love and respect, this ancient religion continues to destroy itself. Unable to grasp this self-destructive quality, vedantists such as Bhyrappa and Pejawar Swamiji blame other religions for the problems of Hinduism. To hide their own faults, they try to spotlight the faults of the others. Thus they continue the cultural and religious violence and the oppression of the masses, that has been going on for the past 5,000 years. Bhyrappa has dug up several historical records to support his arguments (their authenticity can be discussed at a later occasion). But he has used them purely to criticize other religions and not to analyse the situation Hindu religion is in now. So these records are not relevant to the current discussion.

Why is there a sudden rush for religious conversions in India—especially from among the 'Hindus'—today? Why do 'Hindus' treat other 'Hindus' so inhumanly? He has had to look for historical records to understand this. However, in the conversion debate, the most important point to be discussed is: why is the Hindu religion collapsing? We all know that Hinduism is founded upon the theory of varnashrama dharma. A theory that is founded upon caste. Castes in turn are founded upon the notion of untouchability. Without untouchability, there cannot be castes. Without castes, there cannot be varnashrama dharma. Without varnashrama dharma, there would be no Hinduism. Untouchability is, therefore, an inseparable part of Hinduism. This being the situation, what are the intentions of these advocates of Hinduism who oppose conversion? Think about it. They are conspiring to perpetuate this system of untouchability, caste and inequality.

Then what should those opposed to untouchability do? Accept the confines of this vedic religion called Hinduism? Or should they strive for equal opportunities, dignity and self-respect in other religions? The victims of this violence should have the complete right to make this decision for themselves. No one has the right to interfere. It is a constitutional right. This goes for everyone—Bhyrappa, Pejawar and that other advocate of what they call 'reconversion': Chidanandamurthy!

Untouchability has pervaded the entire Hindu religion. Each caste here is untouchable to the other. Let alone non-brahmins—even the sub-castes within brahmins are divided by notions of 'higher' and 'lower' and are untouchable to one another! However 'high' one considers oneself, there is always someone higher—brahmin to lingayat, lingayat to vokkaliga, vokkaliga to kuruba, kuruba to madivala, madivala to kshourika, kshourika to holeya, holeya to madiga, madiga to jaadamali. In this way, untouchability has permeated every caste in varying degrees. The regarding of oneself as higher than the other is 'untouchability'. With this feeling of 'higher and lower' being as omnipresent as the gods themselves, all of society has been rendered untouchable.

For untouchability to be destroyed, Hinduism itself must be destroyed. Otherwise it will destroy the country!

Most people opposed to religious conversions are focusing on the faults of other religions. Amazingly, in the manner of the pot calling the kettle black, they refuse to see their own flaws. Isn't it shameful how they make a racket over the fly in the other's dish while overlooking the rat in their own! I pose this question to everyone opposed to religious conversions.

What are the reasons for religious conversions in India? Is it, as Bhyrappa and his like claim, greed? Fear of persecution? Aggressive proselytization by imperialist religions? Moreover, who are the ones asking these questions? Brahmins such as Bhyrappa and their foot soldiers, those who wish to preserve this unequal, barbaric system of the vedic tradition? Or is it the countless millions in India, who for thousands of years have endured grotesque suffering and subjugation at the hands of the vedics? Since lies abound here, these questions become pertinent. Another question that puzzles me is: what do they have against conversion? To convert or not to convert should be the concern of whoever is considering converting; not Bhyrappa's, not Pejawar's. Why do they meddle with things that do not concern them? Have the dalits or the adivasis, or anyone else, ever asked them to speak on their behalf?

These people did not say a word when savarna Hindus forced dalits to eat shit in Bendigeri, or when dalits were burnt alive by savarna Hindus in Kambalapalli, or when these murderers were acquitted by the courts. Why do they speak now? Who gave them the right to decide what the dalits and adivasis should or shouldn't do?

The cruel reign of the Vedas came to an end when the Constitution of India came into force and each person was given the right to one vote. Now the Constitution is all-supreme. Everyone should follow it. Now Bhyrappa has one vote; Pejawar Swami has one vote; even the dalit sweeper has one vote! When a dalit cannot have a say in Pejawar Swami's affairs, what business does he have in matters concerning the dalits? Is he the self-appointed cultural representative of India?

There is another thing that Bhyrappa and Pejawar Swami must understand. And that is: there is no concept of 'one religion' in India. All we have is castes. And every caste is a religion in itself. Hence, there are thousands of religions. Vedic brahminism is only one of these. But these brahmins are perceiving and analysing everything through their own perspective to the exclusion of all others. They want everyone to follow their ideologies, food habits and culture. Brahmins themselves are divided into hundreds of sub-castes and these sub-castes each have several spiritual orders and pontiffs representing them. These factions are constantly struggling with each other for supremacy. How then can Pejawar Swamiji, the religious head of one order of just one of these factions, take on the mantle of a guide to all Indians? For how many people is

Pejawar pontiff a spiritual leader? Not even 1 per cent of Indians. How then can he speak for a hundred crore people? Is this not arrogance? Is this not religious trespassing? He should be spending his time in a deep forest or a cave, in search of the spiritual truth that Bhyrappa speaks of; why should he bother himself with these affairs? If dalits and adivasis undergo religious conversion, what moral right do the present heirs of the vedic heritage, which persecuted those converting and denied them respect, have to question it?

Another question is whether dalits and adivasis are 'Hindus' at all. Why are they even called Hindus? The truth is that adivasis have no caste. So they were never Hindus. Dalits who are now caught up in the caste structure are not Hindus either. This is because they do not belong to any of the four varnas in Hinduism. Today—even though they are being counted as Hindus for political reasons in government records—dalits do not follow Hindu (vedic) traditions in any of their cultural or religious practices. So why should they be called Hindus? The vedics have planned this systematically, forcibly calling the dalits Hindus and imprisoning the latter in their system for political reasons. It has nothing to do with dalits regarding themselves as Hindus. The vedics are under the illusion that the dalits, weakened by centuries of oppression, have unknowingly identified themselves with the Hindus. The truth is that the dalits and adivasis are not Hindus, but 'religion-less'. Now if they pick a religion for themselves, it is *entering* a religion—not converting.

Another important issue is regarding consistency in the customs, cultural practices and food habits of the non-brahmins. Vedics use the sweeping label 'Hindu practices'. In a country without a unifying religion or culture, it is only natural that the people living in the same geographical area will share some similarities of customs and practices. From what I know, no rural community has the custom of vedic priests conducting religious functions. Nor do vedic priests worship in the temples of the non-brahmins.

But due to the growing influence of Hindutva politics, vedic priests have started sticking their noses into the lives of the non-brahmins. By imposing alien practices upon the non-brahmins, the brahmins endeavour to ensure that the Hindu–vedic culture continues to thrive. This is the conspiracy of the vedics to destroy the indigenous cultures of the masses. People like Bhyrappa are skilfully covering these issues up and misguiding readers through their works.

By criticizing Macaulay's system of education, Bhyrappa is indirectly criticizing the imparting of education to non-brahmins. He shrewdly covers up the fact that, before Macaulay, education in India had become stuck on ritualistic (yajna) knowledge and was, in any case, limited only to the brahmins. It is only with the coming of the colonialists that the 'lower orders'—who were in the clutches of the vedic culture, which was harsher even than the beastly traditions of the Middle Ages—were afforded

any compassion. The downtrodden heaved a sigh of relief at the respite from the barbaric religious violence of the vedics. It is a surprise to me that Bhyrappa, who plays around with history so much, finds this fact so far beyond his comprehension!

Dalit intellectuals oppose the proposal of a law to prohibit religious conversions. Bhyrappa mockingly attributes this to the fear of losing their 'weapon'—the ability to make threats of mass conversions to Islam or Christianity. The malice in his 'humour' has been duly noted. But he should surely know that Dr Ambedkar pondered the matter of conversion for twenty-one years. He scrutinized every religion in the world keenly. Having proclaimed 'I will not die a Hindu' in 1935, he accepted Buddhism only in 1956. In these twenty-one years, he had received invitations from two of the world's biggest religions—Islam and Christianity—to join them. If he had accepted either of these religions, dalits would be ruling India today. But his prudence with regard to India, his tolerance and foresight drew him to Buddhism. For this, the entire vedic society should be grateful to the dalits.

Another thing that Bhyrappa ought to ponder over is this: what if the dalits had struck back in response to the inhumanity and injustices that they suffered at the hands of the vedics for thousands of years? If, instead of putting up with the cruelty of untouchability, and upholding the cause of humanity, dalits had decided to retaliate, where would Bhyrappa and his likes be? The vedic community owes its existence to the generosity and tolerance of the dalits. It would be wise of the vedics not to provoke them further.

Bhyrappa has implicitly supported the goons who have taken up arms against conversion. Violence is inherent to the vedic religion. Before Buddhism came to prominence, the vedic dharma functioned on the basis of violence alone. Bhyrappa misrepresents this now. 'Terrorists plan to gain control over the nation by weakening its security by constantly spreading terror. Lenin, Mao, Nepal's Prachanda used this strategy—even Naxalites use the same strategy,' he writes. 'Don't Hindus have the same determination; why can't they use the same tactics?' he laments. How is it that Bhyrappa forgot Chanakya in this context? Is it age-induced amnesia or selective memory loss? I wonder. Chanakya was the first terrorist in the land of India. Everything that Bhyrappa has written about terrorism applies to him. The tactics he used in destroying the Nanda dynasty in the fourth century BC would be called 'terrorism' today. Bhyrappa can turn to the historians he so trusts for details.

Why is the vedic religion being called the 'Hindu religion'? Also, who created this nomenclature and why? I don't know of the word 'Hindu' being mentioned in any of the scriptures of the vedic religion—right from the Vedas and Upanishads, to the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. The vedic religion, with a heritage going back 5,000 years, began to be referred to as the *Hindu* religion only since the eighteenth century. According to historical records, Persian traders mispronounced the name of the river

Sindhu as 'Hindu' and used the term for the people living on its banks. Later, the land inhabited by these people came to be known as 'Hindustan'. Then, after 1875, reformers of the vedic religion, Raja Ram Mohun Roy of Bengal and Dayanand Saraswati—both with vedic backgrounds—popularized the usage of the term 'Hindu religion'.

Thus, the word 'Hindu', today limited to people of the vedic religion, was once used as an overriding label for people of various cultures, traditions, ideologies and food practices, all because they lived in this land. However, these people neither accepted nor rejected this nomenclature; they remained passive to it. Only after it picked up political and cultural mileage, did it gain acceptance for administrative purposes. Those who have read Swami Vivekananda would know that there was no one more opposed to brahminism than him. He repeatedly appealed to the people to protect the 'Hindu religion' and the country from the stronghold of the brahminists. He insisted that the brahmins and the priestly classes were solely responsible for the deplorable condition of India. But today, these very forces have distorted his teachings; they claim things he has never said and have overhauled his entire image to suit their own interests.

What does Hindu dharma have apart from caste, untouchability and inequality? When this question is asked, the likes of Bhyrappa start speaking of the philosophical aspects of this 'Hindu dharma'. But this is not the philosophy of every Indian—it is only limited to the vedic religion. There is no equality in it. The spiritual attainment through introspective practices contained within it, which Bhyrappa talks about, is only about individual progress and not about the collective development of society. The only person in history to have used personal enlightenment for the good of society was the Buddha. It was he who spread love and compassion in the world, empathized with people's suffering and showed people the path to spiritual attainment.

Perhaps the vedics and the ones that consider themselves as belonging to 'forward' castes see something of value in the Hindu religion. But the dalits, adivasis and the downtrodden see nothing but caste, untouchability, inequality and humiliation in it.

The fact is that those opposed to religious conversions cannot comprehend the cruelty —worse than hunger—of untouchability. Only those who have experienced this pain can understand it. One can tolerate hunger but not the ignominy of untouchability. The barbarism of the Hindus who put all sorts of animals on the altars in their temples and worship them as gods, but regard fellow human beings who share their flesh and blood as lowly, is unmatched. How can one call the followers of a 'religion' that forces people to eat shit 'human' at all! Anybody with any intellectual capacity, with any compassion, must surely seek an answer to this question.

Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy

‘You don’t find anger or aversion in my poetry. Pain flows, molten, underground. It is subtle—to be sensed. It touches the heart; it does not erupt,’ Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy observes. Though he acknowledges the importance of the context created by the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti and the turning point that it represents in Kannada literature, this poet who began publishing in the early 1980s is an independent figure, an introvert, one who does not write for the occasion, or on request. He waits, he says, for the words that ‘emerge from the insults, the humiliation that has solidified in me’. He adds, ‘Unlike Siddalingaiah, I was not in the movement, not an activist. I did not take political positions or support parties. Writing was the only option for me.’ He has twenty-three books to his credit, six of which are collections of poetry. D.R. Nagaraj once said about this poet: ‘He has his own style.’ Chinnaswamy is considered a Kannada poet rather than a dalit poet and his work circulates widely.

Born in 1954 in Mudnakudu, a village in Chamarajanagar district, Chinnaswamy grew up in difficult circumstances. His father, Mudnakudu Basavarajaiah, was a police constable whose earnings barely sustained their family of eight. Though yearning to continue with his studies, Chinnaswamy had to find a job immediately after his BCom to add to the meagre family income. This did not deter him from studying for his MCom as an external student and later acquiring an MA and DLitt in Kannada from Kannada University, Hampi. These achievements, considerable in themselves, are all the more striking when we learn that no one in his family is educated beyond school. Today, he is the chief accounts officer and financial advisor to the Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Authority.

Influenced by the Telugu poets Sri Sri and Cherabandu Raju, Chinnaswamy began writing poems in the early 1980s. ‘I felt I could also write like that. There was no free verse in Kannada. Of course, the Navya [Modernist] poets had used free verse, but their poetry was complex and abstract.’ His first collection, *Kondigalu Mattu Mullubeligalu* (Links and Barbed Wire), appeared in 1989, followed by *Godhuli* (Dusk) in 1993, *Nanondu Maravagiddare* (If I were a Tree) in 1998, *Chappali Mattu Nanu* (Sandals and I) in 2001 and *Kanakambari* (The Golden Robed One) in 2003. The earlier poetry is empirical and experience-based, while his later poetry is philosophical and explores Buddhist thought. A sixth book of poems, which appeared in 2010, is titled *Buddha*

Beladingal (The Full Moon of Buddha). Although best known as a poet, Chinnaswamy is also a playwright, short-story writer and essayist.

Chinnaswamy's work has been well received, and he is a sought-after speaker and writer. A book of essays, *Marali Manege* (Back Home), that he edited, was published in 2006 as a souvenir commemorating the fiftieth year of Ambedkar's conversion sold 730 copies in one day. The title of the book suggests that the move towards Buddha is also, for dalits, one that leads back to their origins, their home. Buddhism has the potential to emancipate dalits, he argues.

Twenty-six of Chinnaswamy's poems have been translated into Spanish by Rowena Hill, and published in the Colombian journal *Arquitrave* in 2004. A larger collection was published by the Venezuelan Ministry of Culture in their Poems of the World series.. At the invitation of Andes University, he toured Venezuela, reading his poetry to audiences around that country. He has also been invited to read his poetry at festivals in Granada and Nicaragua and at Tel Aviv's famous Helicon festival. Pleased with the response his reading evoked, he says: 'Poetry is taken much more seriously in these countries than it is here.' Eleven poems and one play he has written have been prescribed for study in university syllabi in Karnataka.

Chinnaswamy believes that the Indian mindset has barely changed. 'Go to any village even in 2011 and you will spot a boy like the boy I was; he faces the same experience … Caste continues to have a stronghold. Maybe it is even deepening. Earlier it was only feudal, now it has become a psychological war as well.'

To a Rag and Bone Boy

Translated by Rowena Hill

In someone's shed
in someone else's arms
the boy has slept;
he gets up at dawn, kicks the laggard beside him,
slings a sack-bag over his shoulder,
and out he goes into lanes and filthy alleys.
He comes to a corporation dump,
stands with clasped hands as if discovering a treasure,

turns and wades in;
his hands sift through it
as if removing a tiny piece of severed intestine
with a doctor's eye.
Among the broken glass there,
the plastic bottles,
the torn rubber condoms,
the old papers he lifts, there
where some housewife has wrapped a sickening red tampon—
below all that, something brings a smile:
a torn and patched two-rupee note.
Here and there, once pretty broken dolls
may kindle a light in his mind,
finding marbles can push him
into playfulness.
Broken eggshells may cut his feet,
he may thrust his hand into the pockets of old shorts
and touch a blunt blade
and the gush of spurting blood
will further squeeze his sapless frame.
He has no parents, but he has company,
he is an orphan, but he is satisfied!
What remains in cans emptied by rich men's kids,
or bottles thrown away by their fathers, becomes holy water.
Leftovers sticking to leaf plates become holy food.
Opening his mouth for a beedi stub,
he leaves for the next lane.

Standing where he should not stand,
sitting where he should not sit,
scratching at his sores
when flies and insects swarm round them,

shuffling and combing through his precious collection
piece by piece again and again,
surrendering it for a few coins to the trader,
at last he throws himself down
in someone else's shed,
someone else's child.

Grandmother and Granddaughter

Translated by Rowena Hill

In a certain kind of village:
the same kind of grandmother.
In the big house is a veranda,
in the veranda a corner,
in the corner she sits against the wall.

1.
In that forgotten corner
is a worn-out old broom,
an old broom used to avert the evil eye
from a crawling baby
and singed after
sweeping out flames.
So, before the Mari festival
the place is ominous,
grandma becomes anxious she may be blamed
for some evil event.
Her food comes punctually,
her plate of greens taunts her,
her spoilt daughter-in-law grows angry

and calls her names.
When she's not in the corner
She's staggering on her stick to the backyard
and from the yard back to the corner.
Her end should come there in the corner,
grandma thinks as she sits brooding.
In the yard people may balk at lifting her;
and not on the dark stretch between them either—
people on the road would feel sorry for her.
Always in her trance, the grandmother
wonders how many relatives
will arrive like crows
to pick through the ashes she leaves behind.

2.
On the veranda a granddaughter
plays hopscotch, a smile
that flashes and fades.
Patching together memories
of her own past with the child's game,
she searches for eternity in the stream of life.
When the granddaughter is through
she calls, 'Come and look through my hair,
it's itching, bring the comb.'
Putting up with the sores from scratched bites
and the old woman's odour,
the green fruit sits down to her stories;
her sprouting fingers search
a head rich with eggs.
As it loosens, an unexpected store,
a heritage, is opened up,
an amazing world of stories.

Separating out each hair
as if turning pages
—new word new wind—
the fingers pick out invading lice
and squash them, the comb
defeats the enemy army.
In the tough runnels of wrinkled cheeks
are tears: is it the granddaughter telling the story?
and grandma listening?

Sandals and I

Translated by Rowena Hill

When I go to the temple
I don't leave my sandals outside,
I stay outside myself.

Sandals on a cobbler's feet
is news as rare
as a man biting a dog.

All the legs
that leave their sandals outside
surge over me.

I'm a plant,
my work's my root;
they don't understand that.

Like a crane stretching its neck
at a dried-up pond or waterhole,

I stand on tiptoe
peeking at the figure of God,
stealing all I can see of it.

The glittering jewel in the diadem
that I glimpse among dozens of heads
expands into the soft couch
and the rearing snake umbrella.
Once I saw the diamond-studded crown,
the necklace and the sacred thread.

The sacred lamp burns on its platter,
bells are clanging,
the leather sandals under my feet
become hot iron,
the ground falls away, my damp
body burns with flames.

I am like the faithful Garuda column
keeping its distance; I throw
incense in the pot of embers before it
and when smoke rises,
I am grateful.

The people who approach the gods,
offering money, perambulating,
sometimes look at me and then through me.
My mind is only on God.

They receive flowers and sandal paste
in the sanctum,
but their souls are with the shoes they left
outside.

As I stand every day on the porch,
craning my neck and peering,
my soul, becoming pure,
grows close to the gods
inside.

K.B. Siddaiah

This feisty professor of English, Dalit Sangharsh Samiti activist and well-regarded Kannada poet hails from Kengeri, a village in what used to be Bangalore Rural district. Born in 1954, he did his early schooling in a government primary school in the village, where the medium of instruction was Kannada. An early feat—and this is a reflection on the Indian education system as much as it is a statement about Siddaiah's academic abilities—was passing the school leaving examination (SSLC) in the very first attempt. 'There were others, from all communities, who had passed, but no one got through in the first attempt, including the headman's son. With this achievement, I became the hero of the village.' Siddaiah's father, Bailappa, was a bonded labourer in the brahmin shanbog Shammana's household. Some days after he had learnt of the boy's feat, the shanbog came, and standing some distance away from their house, called out: 'Eh! Bayla! Come. Bring your son along. I'll get him admission in a college in Tumkur.' Maintaining a half-kilometre distance, Siddaiah and his father walked behind the shanbog. They passed a Hanuman temple. The shanbog placed a twenty-five paise coin before the deity and called out: 'Ey, Siddha! Pick up that money.' Their village was served by a rural bus. 'This was the first time I travelled by bus. I had to pass my SSLC to enter a bus!' Siddaiah observes.

The shanbog, an influential contractor, took father and son straight to the MLA and asked for help with the admission. 'It is interesting. A brahmin took me to a bhovi[1] (the MLA) who then took me to a lingayat (the principal) for admission. Since the bhovi was an MLA, the lingayat principal had to listen to him,' Siddaiah observed with a chuckle. 'Seeing my marks, he suggested I take up science, saying that, as an SC, there would be better opportunities for me in science. After the exams, when he saw that I had scored the highest marks in English, he changed his mind and sent me to do a BA in English. I would memorize passages from the prescribed texts—*Macbeth*, *Hamlet*—and recite them, even though I did not understand the meaning.' For his MA in English, Siddaiah went to Mysore University.

In the mid-1970s, Mysore was on the boil because of the boosa controversy. Siddaiah, who had 'never before heard of anything like a dalit movement', came into contact with Devanoora Mahadeva, U.R. Ananthamurthy and K. Ramadas.

'Siddalingaiah was the first to start writing songs, which he would sing at DSS cultural events. I too began writing songs,' Siddaiah recounts. 'The first one, "Ondu

Dahanada Kathe", was based on an incident in Kunigal taluk, where a dalit who was unable to repay a loan was burnt to death in his hut by a gowda. It became a very popular song. Once, when it was sung before an audience of more than a thousand in front of the Vidhana Soudha, I could see tears in the eyes of many, including those of some leaders. We established the Kunigal Dalit Sangharsh Samiti after this incident took place.

'This is how my journey as a creative writer began. That poem was included in *Horatada Haadugalu* [Songs of Struggle]. This book was like a bible as well as a weapon for dalit activists. Each one carried a copy in their bag. Around the time Siddalingaiah published *Holemaadigara Haadu* [The Songs of Holeyas and Madigas], I wrote the long poem "Bakala". Intellectuals and critics knew nothing of the sage Bakala, who was a madiga, but we grew up hearing his story. According to my grandmother, Bakala is a descendent of the sage Jambavantha and he created land from the waters, sacrificing his two sons, Dakkala and Madiga in the process. A second long poem, titled "Dakkali Katha Devi Kavya", is about this sub-caste that is untouchable even to other madigas. One section of the poem deals with the masculine and feminine dimensions of power: the dakkalis do not have houses, neither do they cook food. They normally live under a village tamarind tree and beg for food from the madiga households. One day, instead of carrying back the food for his wife and child, a man eats it all up on the way. He then tells his wife that he is hungry and asks her for food. A quarrel ensues in which he picks up a tamarind stick and starts beating her. She warns him that she has the power of magic—but he laughs: "How can you, a woman, warn me like this? I am your husband!" Angered, she curses him and he turns into a woman! A third poem, "Anathma", draws on my experience of life in the village, and is influenced by Buddhist thinking, which is focused not on God, or on the vedic soul (atma), but on the self.'

Siddaiah's most recent long poem, *Gallebani* (The Curing Vat 2009), excerpts from which have been translated here, is about the madigas' curing vat or urn. The water in the urn cures leather and it also heals skin diseases. It is also used in a brahmin wedding ritual. At midnight, the brahmin would arrive to collect this water from the madiga to sprinkle on the bride and groom before they looked at the star, Arundhati. 'My poetry is for me both a social and a spiritual quest. One cannot be spiritual without being fully involved in the social. In fact, that involvement itself is spirituality. I discard the body of the untouchable—so named by others—to acquire a new body. This disowning is a socio-spiritual process. In *Gallebani*, I am trying to discover my own unique world, not one that is parallel to the mainstream. It is not just a quest for identity or the search for a counterculture; I draw on my people and my experience to offer a new world, and with it, a new vision.' In his garden, as a marker of his cultural and

familial inheritance, Siddaiah keeps his grandfather's huge clay vat, which is nearly a hundred years old.

Siddaiah's poetry uses his 'home' language—his 'real' mother tongue. 'If Ananthamurthy can use his mother tongue, why can't I?' he asks. But he qualifies this with: 'It is not easy to do this because my education and the "refinement" it has gifted me, makes it difficult for me to inhabit my mother's language with full poetic seriousness. There is a danger that I will insult the language. Today, after many years of hard work, however, I can with some confidence make the claim that the language used in my home can provide a full and important artistic experience which is of this soil.'

When talk turns to education, we ask him about his life as a college teacher. Siddaiah turns to an early incident. His first job was in Kalpataru College in Tiptur, an institution run by the lingayat community. He got the job on a reserved seat and replaced a temporary appointee who was a lingayat. Initially, only students from the social welfare hostels attended his class. One day, he reached class a little late to find that a brawl was in progress in the classroom. Someone had written on the blackboard: 'Who is this madiga trying to teach us?' This had led to the altercation. 'I told the students that they should have informed the principal instead of fighting among themselves,' Siddaiah says. 'But the students knew that he was a lingayat and felt there was no point reporting anything to him. After that I became very strict. I would not allow people to walk in or out after the class had begun and worked hard to teach well. I would explain things in Kannada as well as English, whereas the previous teacher taught only in English. My classes became popular and I had no trouble after that.'

On the dalit movement, Siddaiah feels that although very good younger writers have emerged—he names N.K. Hanumanthaiah, Du Saraswathi, Lakkur Ananda and Sivashankar, whose 2011 collection, *Mane, Mane* (House, House) uses an idiom that is dalit in an altogether new and striking way—similar liveliness and creativity is hard to locate in the movement itself. 'That needs revival,' he observes.

The Curing Vat: Excerpts

Translated by Deeptha Achar and K.S. Chitra

Shall I abandon

this body, this whole body, my body?

Shiva … Shiva …

every inch of this body
will be made to blossom as a flower.
Can one weave
this flower of flesh
with strings of raw intestine
and make a garland of flesh
like a garland-maker?
Can one offer such a garland,
Shiva … Shiva … Shiva …
to one without a head, like Angulimala?[2]
Behold! Here and now
I will make
tongs of both my hands.
In the furnace of caste,
blistering,
sparks of enlightenment
will lie in the grip of these tongs,
holding, clenching.
I look for the unseen—
what if *I* were to see this unseen—
Shiva … Shiva … Shiva …
who rejects the head, like Allama?

Behold! Behold! Look! Look!
At this moment,
in a fraction of a second,
I will make my forehead the foundation stone,
my legs, I will turn into
sledgehammers.
In the mouth of the furnace,
heated, cooked through,
the red-hot iron plate

is struck, beaten with a hammer,
bent, perfected, smoothened.
A formless ring is wrought.
I look for the unseen—
what if *I* were to see this unseen—
Shiva … Shiva … Shiva …
who annihilates his head and gleams,
like Manteswamy.
.. .
I was just sleeping
on the lap of Madlakkigudde[3] Hill
never wanting to wake up.
On waking,
I never wanted to say this to anyone.
I was just lying down
at this moment,
wanting, surely, just to die.
All of a sudden,
I don't know from where,
I heard an embodied voice say
'Come, come, KB, come,
Lankesh, Tejaswi, MDN,
BK[4] too are here, do come!
Bring Devanoora also!
There is nothing over there—
just come here.
Only when I came here did I find
that nothing at all lay there.
Ki Ram will certainly come.
Make sure you don't leave
your guru, Ananthamurthy, behind.

But do leave Ravi Varma[5] there only—
let him dispense social justice.
Minister Siddaramaiah has become corrupt,
said the voice.
The invitation sent
from the seat of the president,
K. Ramadas,flew to me like a life-bird—
sitting on my eyelid
piercing my ear,
it pecked away and ate the earwax there.
Unfurling its wings,
it whispered in my ear
not to tell this
to anyone
in seven lives.
‘Even if seven cycles of life and death
pass by and vanish,
swear on the seven Mandemmas,
do not tell anyone,
that I touched you—
touched you such that I became impure,’
said the bird.
It asked me to swear
never to tell anyone.
The moment it asked for this promise
fury rose in me—
a rage
that made me feel like raising my hand to cut it down.
Did this wrath boil over?
Did my head cool?
Feeling as impotent as a man who has just ejaculated,

I was just lying down
on the lap of Madlakkigudde Hill
today,
wanting, surely, just to die.
.. .
Why, Mother, why
are you sitting down here
where three roads meet
at the bottom of Mukkannugudde Hill,
composing your body
into the posture of childbirth?

Shameless mendicant,
holding a begging bowl,
I move from house to house
through terrifying streets.
I cry for alms,
begging and pleading for three morsels.
Baring a hungry tongue,
widening sunken eyes
opening deaf ears
turning into soft stone
for some sculptor
to carve something,
you sit, offering your body
as the natal home of art.

Who, Mother, who
engraved these bruises,
on your sturdy thighs?
Who scored these blood clots
on your vagina and breasts

and sculpted burn sores there?
Who made this pus and blood ooze?
The flowing blood has congealed,
turning into blood-stone.
Here you sit, opening your blood-eye.
Breasts that have given milk
have become volcanoes spewing fire.
Veins and arteries have turned into gravestones
and breath has ceased in this grave.
Suffocating you to death,
they handled you and carved you,
touching your body, repeatedly.
As they chiselled your mind
they chiselled me also
without even touching me.
Why, Mother, why
are you sitting down here,
becoming one with this point of silence
where three roads meet?
Why have you become mute witness
to the living things that dwell and die
within the wrinkles of your skin?
Why, Mother, why
have you tied live coal
in the pallu that dandles the baby?
With the tongue that sings lullabies,
you explode with curses:

That I may forget
my path.
That I may forget
my words.

That I may lose
my wife and children.
...
If you speak,
the arid land and all its creatures
should gladden.
Held in the fist, flung
into the furrow of a poem,
the seed of speech should take root and grow.

If you speak,
that Shiva's drum
should split and burst into fragments.
Shiva, impoverished, should hide in the folds of
Shreemati
Parvati's pallu
and cry like a baby.

If you speak,
worldly folk should get weary of the world,
devotees should get exhausted,
mutts and their lands should burn down
and that ash should be smeared on the forehead.

If you speak
of Basava's truth inside,
of Shiva's truth outside—
this proposition of inward and outward
should have no foundation—
this is the knowledge of which you should speak.

Oh seven Mandemmas!
Tell me, at least now,

whose index finger
cleared my throat
and gave me voice?
Which Aksharamari[5] climbed on my shoulder
to make me utter
these words with my tongue?
These words
that clatter like the broken drum
turn into vachanas and live;
but, refusing to breathe the air of vachanas,
they are rendered homeless and live in the structure of the poem,
of folk songs.
The mysterious becomes simple,
the simple, mysterious.
Regardless of who agrees
or not,
regardless of whether it rains
or stops,
dripping
like raindrops hidden behind leaves,
these words weep
stars, like tears,
in the poet's sling bag
twinkling, sparkling,
tumbling out,
peeping.
Here, there, everywhere,
they turn into fireflies
that you come across, along the way.
In that same road the crippled,
the hungry ask

‘Give me, KB, give me a star!
Give me one star!’
‘Wait, I will just catch one for you.’
If I touch it
the firefly would vanish like a mirage.
That illusory firefly
burst the sty in the eye
and flew away,
leaving the eye to burn and burn.

The unbearable burning and the pain
can be felt through the mirror of the eye
only as a reflection in a looking glass.

Siddalingaiah

How does one introduce a figure who has made history in more ways than one and is indeed history himself? Born in 1954 in a village called Magadi outside Bangalore to parents who were debt-ridden agricultural labourers, Siddalingaiah moved as a young boy into a city slum and then into a social welfare hostel. The boosa agitation of the mid-1970s precipitated this precocious young man—already a poet, debater and student leader—into the thick of dalit politics. He is one of the founders and prime movers of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti and the dalit wave that spread through Karnataka in the 1970s and '80s. His lyrics are sung even today by 'fighting people' (his phrase). At the age of thirty-four, in 1988, he became a member of the Legislative Council and, in 2006, chairman, Kannada Development Authority, a post with cabinet rank, which he held until 2008. He has been head of the department of Kannada at Bangalore University and a member of the University Syndicate of Kannada University, Hampi. Now chairman, Kannada Book Authority, he is acknowledged—even by his critics—as a symbol of the dalit movement and a leading public intellectual and Kannada poet.

Among Siddalingaiah's earliest memories—he was four or maybe five—is the sight of his father, yoked like an ox to the plough, working the landlord's field in the burning sun. 'I watched, amazed, through a gap in the wall but did not realize that one of the two men was my father until I heard a woman exclaim: "Just look at what Devanna has come to!"' In the evening, he found his mother massaging his groaning father's neck and shoulders with oil. 'On that day,' Siddalingaiah observes, 'I knew that our lot was not good.'

The family fell into debt and his father 'ran away' to Bangalore. The rest of them struggled to manage but the children often went hungry. 'I remember my teacher, Nagappachar, used to ask whether I had had anything to eat. He was concerned and would probably have given me food, but I always said that I had eaten.'

Then they moved to Manchanabele, his mother's village. It was a new cultural experience: there were no upper castes in this village—only dalits and Muslims. The Muslims did not really practise untouchability (though the dalits were not allowed into their tea shops). Festivals were celebrated; people got possessed. The village was located between the hills and the only way out was the valley of the river that flowed past it. His grandfather's house looked out onto the range. The river was the centre of all life. Siddalingaiah was sent to the local school run by his uncle. Irritated by the

constant quarrelling of his teachers (he later discovered they were husband and wife), he stopped going to class. Instead, he would make his way to the river and laze around in it. If any of the other children came by—which they would, since they were often sent out to collect firewood for the teacher—he would duck and stay under water until they moved out of sight!

This idyll was not to last long. His father returned and took the family back with him to Bangalore. They lived in the Srirampuram slum area. For the young boy, the shock could not have been greater. The memories from that time are vivid: 'There were physical fights, clashes between gangs, thefts; one night a body was brought back to their neighbourhood. Some rowdies had attacked the man, tortured him and thrown him into a drain … I had never seen anything like this in the village.'

His mother found a job in a social welfare hostel as a sweeper and she managed to get him a place in the hostel. Becoming a 'hostel student' was a turning point in his life. There were regular visits from ministers, VIPs and dalit leaders who used to come and address the students. He says: 'I decided to fight for justice and became an Ambedkarite. At the age of thirteen, I burnt pictures of gods and goddesses. I used to get students together in my room and hold discussions and sing songs about the condition of the hostel, the shortage of food and the situation of dalits. I then read a biography of Ambedkar. I went to all thirteen hostels in the city and spoke about him. I was only fourteen but was very popular and had become a kind of leader and was also composing some (immature!) poetry.'

Obviously, the popularity he enjoyed and his success ('I was a good debater. Wherever I went, I would get the first or second prize. If I was part of the team, the shield was guaranteed,' he says mischievously) were important factors, but Siddalingaiah sets his 'decision to study well' in the context of his parents being humiliated. 'Some of the students would order my mother around and scold her … Once, on a festival day, my father came to hostel thinking that there would be food and he could also eat. I did not notice him. But somehow someone identified him and pushed him out. I could not eat after that. I decided that I would study well and take revenge by becoming a good scholar and intellectual.'

He also began writing poetry. The poems were composed in a graveyard where he used to go in the summer—it was for him a quiet place outside the slum where his home was located. 'There were big flowering trees, benches to sit on … I went every day, became friends with the people who worked there. I ate with them, began teaching their children in the evenings. When I was reading or writing, they would not disturb me. I wrote poems, praising the graveyards and criticizing parks.' These graveyard poems became very popular and he collected them into a manuscript, which he showed an educated cousin, expecting appreciation and encouragement. Instead, the cousin told

Siddalingaiah's father: 'Your son will be polished off by the government if these poems are published.' This was during the Emergency. His father found the manuscript and burnt it.

In 1972–73, he joined the Vicharwadi Parishat (Rationalist Council), which was highly influenced by Periyar. The council was a sort of challenge to 'the authority of the great Kannada Sahitya Parishat', Siddalinagiah explains. He was already well known as a leader of the hostel students when he joined the Government Arts and Science College in 1974. This college, with a student strength of over 3,000, was famous for the discussions that emerged from it and the strikes and agitations of which it was a centre. In an unprecedented development—this was the first time ever that a dalit would hold office in the students' union—Siddalingaiah was elected fine arts secretary. The upper castes were incensed. 'D.R. Nagaraj, Agrahara Krishnamurthy, Karigowda Beechanahalli and Kalluri Megharaj, who had supported us, were all beaten up.'

And then came the uproar over Basavalingappa's boosa statement. The protesting upper castes went on a rampage. Rallies were held, effigies burnt. 'People used to bring the register to class and call out the names of the dalits (usually indicated in the register). When the dalits stood up, they would be dragged out and beaten. In fact, being dark-skinned was cause enough for a beating.

'The minister [Basavalingappa] sent for me—in fact, the deputy mayor of Bangalore himself came to the hostel to fetch me. The minister said, "You are the elected fine arts secretary. Organize the dalit students in my support." We went around the fifteen or so hostels speaking about the issue. Then we organized a convention, which between three and four thousand students attended. It was broken up by a gang of about a hundred rowdies sent by those in the Cabinet who were opposed to Basavalingappa. We were unarmed. The physical fighting continued for about an hour. D.R. Nagaraj and some of the others ran away. I was the chairman of the conference. I could not run away. So I stood there. Someone called out, "You speak of caste—where do you find caste? Caste does not exist today." Somebody in the crowd shouted out, "You say there is no caste. Give your sister to me, I will marry her!" That enraged them and they went on a rampage.' A case was filed against Siddalingaiah.

In Mysore, he addressed the students of a depressed classes hostel. After he left, the hostel was set on fire. He wrote his BA final examinations under police protection arranged by the principal, B.C. Wesley and joined Bangalore University for an MA in Kannada.

Finally, Basavalingappa resigned. Some 50–100 people caught hold of me, took me to a room and with their weapons pointed at me, made me sign a letter of resignation as fine arts secretary.

‘Feeling that it was necessary for the dalits to organize themselves to defend life and property, a meeting was organized in Mysore in 1975 and the DSS was set up.’ Siddalingaiah, who was only an MA student at the time, was one of the three key figures in the movement, the others being Devanoora Mahadeva and B. Krishnappa. ‘There were a number of influences on the DSS—we knew about the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra; the work of the Digamabara Kavulu in Andhra had been translated and we listened to Gaddar’s songs. In fact after the boosa events, I became a communist and joined the CPI. I attended classes in Marxism and learnt a great deal. I left them when they decided to support the Emergency—and joined the CPM, which was involved in workers’ and peasants’ struggles. In DSS, we tried to bring together the communists, the socialists and the dalits. It was tough because the dalits were critical of the Left who spoke of class and not caste. All the same, we succeeded to an extent.’

By 1975, Siddalingaiah had put together the path-breaking *Holemaadigara Haadu* (Songs of the Holeya and Madiga). These were set to music and sung—often and memorably by Janardhan (Jenni)—at meetings, conferences and seminar. ‘It was the singing that often opened up, even for me, the implications of a song,’ Siddalingaiah observes. The collection is today recognized as marking a major intervention in Kannada literature and society. ‘My teachers in Bangalore University were not dalits, but they were progressive and they stood by me. When they came to know that I wrote poetry, they encouraged me to publish. *Holemaadigara Haadu* sold 1,000 copies in one week. Thirty to forty thousand copies have been sold so far—in fact, people just print and distribute copies themselves,’ he adds.

Saaviraru Nadigalu (Thousands of Rivers, 1979), his next collection of songs—the title poem of which is translated here—represented a new stage in the dalit struggle, in which they join with peasants and workers in a larger Bandaya or ‘rebel’ movement. He has four more collections—of poems rather than songs—*Kappu Kaadina Haadu* (The Song of the Black Forest, 1982), *Aayda Kavithegalu* (Selected Poems, 1997), *Meravanige* (Procession, 2000) and *Nanna Janagalu Matthu Itara Kavitegalu* (My People and Other Poems, 2005).

His autobiography, which appears in two parts, *Ooru, Keri: Atmakathana*[1] (1997) and *Ooru, Keri 2: Atmakathana* (2006) brings in a significant and altogether new voice and form into dalit writing and Kannada literature. D.R. Nagaraj titled his review of the first part: ‘The Power of Poor People’s Laughter’. Siddalingaiah has also published a book on village deities based on his Ph.D thesis. His speeches in the Legislative Assembly have appeared as a two-volume collection.

A Song

Translated by Maithreyi K.R.

Bash them, kick them,
skin these bastards alive!
God is one, they claim
but build a different temple on each street.
We are all God's children, they say,
yet they shrink from us holeya as if we're snakes.
No entry for us to their inns, their wells, their houses.
But dogs that lick our shit may share their rooms.
They eat what we grow, take the sweat of our brow.
It's only us people they shun.
We are not holeya and madiga any more, my brothers.
They call us harijan and laugh, my brothers!
They hold 'meetings' about us, draft laws for our sakes;
pat each other's backs in our name.
They'll liberate us, they declare in the papers—
how they yell from their mikes!
Yet no *ischool* for us, my friends, only drudgery.
Nor can we hold our heads up.
They're playing games with us, these bastards!
So, smash them, kick them, break these whoresons' bones!

Thousands of Rivers

Translated by M. Madhava Prasad

Yesterday
they came like a mountain,

did my people.
Dark faces, silvery beards, smouldering eyes
tearing day and night apart, kicking sleep goodbye.
Blankets shivered at their waking;
the earth shook under their feet.

Marching like ants, roaring like lions
Down with inequality!
Forever down with
the arrogance of the rich!

Like countless snakes they crawled in
and filled the town;
descended to the lower depths
soared high in the sky.

In the streets and the lanes
under trees and by the fences
in the landlord's house, on the master's throne
everywhere they flowed like water,
did my people.
When they opened their mouths
the others fell silent.
Listening to their voices
the other throats dried up.
With their waving arms they stirred up
a storm of revolution,
did my people.
They caught by the neck those
who had beaten them with sticks.

Police lathis, agents' knives,
barrels of guns,

Vedas, shastras, puranas
all floated like dry leaves.

Thousands of rivers to
the sea of struggle.

My People

Translated by M. Madhava Prasad

They who died of starvation, carried stone on their backs,
They who got kicked around and fell, my people;
They who touch the master's feet and beg with folded hands,
devotees of God are they, my people.

They who plough and sow and harvest the crop,
They who sweat and fry in the sun, my people.
Empty-handed they came and sat down with a sigh,
and wrapped their empty bellies in cloth, my people.

They who raised mansions, built bungalows
and got buried in the foundation, my people.
They who lay by the roadside and bore their lot silently,
they who wept silently, my people.

They who paid interest and burnt to ashes
in a blaze of speeches;
They who made shoes for their God-fearing,
feasting exploiters, my people.

They who dig up gold and have never seen food,
they who weave cloth and go naked,

they do as they are told, my people.
They are content to live on air, my people.

The Dalits Are Here

Translated by M. Madhava Prasad

The dalits are coming, step aside—
hand over the charge, let them rule.

Minds burning with countless dreams,
slogans like thunder and lightning,
in the language of earthquakes,
here comes the dalit procession,
writing [history] with their feet.

Into the dump go gods and gurus,
down the drain go the lawmakers.
On a path they struck for themselves
march the dalits in procession,
burning torches in their hands,
sparks of revolution in their eyes
exploding like balls of fire.

For the thorn bushes of caste and religion,
they were as thorns in the side.
They became the sky that looked down at
the seven seas that swallowed them.

Since Rama's time and Krishna's time
unto the time of the Gandhis,
They had bowed low with folded hands.

Now they have risen in struggle.

It grows, it breaks out of its shell
the endless dalit procession.
Bullet for bullet, blood for blood,
shoulder to shoulder, lives bound together.

Under the flag of dalit India
stood the farmers and workers.
Flowers bloom in every forest,
thousands of birds take flight,
the eastern sky turned red,
morning broke for the poor.

The dalits are coming, step aside!
The dalits have come, give it up!

Ambedkar

Translated by M. Madhava Prasad

O cry that burst
from the nation's heart,
towering banyan
wide as the sky,

O first words of
the dark millions,
declaration that resounded
beyond the sea and sky,

You showed with your life

the way of struggle.
You called us to come and see
the cracks in the mansion.

To bury [the demon of] caste
you organized lakhs of people
and led them into action,
O ocean of self-esteem,

O thunder and lightning that
struck the soil of Maharashtra,
why did you not bring rain?
Was it only a trick of light?

You who sowed the barren land
with the plough of self-respect,
you did not stay to water and weed
and see the crop grow.

O diamond that cut through
the iron shackles
and broke the golden chains,
O Mahabouddha bhikkhu,

You woke up the sleeping,
who will make us stand?
The need for strength to back resolve
who will teach us now?

Song of the Cow

Translated by Tejaswini Niranjana

They have set me by the manger,
They have tethered me to a peg.
My owner feeds me handfuls of hay
And compliments himself.

He's a godlike man, my owner,
Looking at the welts he's laid on my back,
He swells with pride at his own strength
He's like a king, my owner,
In the shed they tie me up,
Calling me 'Mother, Mother!'
Have words no meaning at all?

To the thick, rich milk I give them,
They add water and sell it.
Before my very eyes they sell it.
Heavy is the wooden cart
But heavier is my owner,
Heavier than Bhima himself,
Move it, they tell me, move it.

At the Sankranti festival
I must jump over fire.
They don't wash my behind
But deck my horns with flowers,
They push me to the fire, they push me.

Ooru Keri (Part 1): Excerpts

Translated by S.R. Ramakrishna

Sampige Tree and Torch Ghost

A huge sampige tree stood in the hostel's inner yard. When it was in bloom, the ground below was strewn with flowers. Senior students used to say it was haunted. We were scared to go near the tree after sundown.

When students came to know that several ghosts had set up their families in the tree, they were scared to even look at it. Everyone believed another ghost lived in the old well beside the hostel. Hostel residents would wake up at four in the morning and take a cold bath. They would scoop out water with their meal plates and pour it over themselves. When they were bathing one morning, a fire broke out in the field in front of the hostel. The boys began shouting that it was a torch ghost and started running. Many had been bathing in the nude. They ran for their lives. They scared the others by appearing in the nude, bodies half-soaped, resembling ghosts themselves. The flame went out suddenly and the boys retrieved their clothes.

Ghost Who Woke Up Student for Prayer

We were required to attend the prayers right after our baths. The prayer hall could seat three to four hundred students. It had a wide platform. Once, at five in the morning, a boy rushed in screaming 'Ayyayyo' and disturbed the prayer. The startled warden said in Hindi, 'Stop the prayer.'

We stopped, mortified. The warden enquired what his problem was. The boy hadn't woken up for his cold-water bath, had missed the prayers and was sleeping in his room. He had been doing this for a long time. No one had caught him out so far. That day, someone said, 'Get up and go for prayers.' The boy flung aside his blanket, thinking it was the warden, but it wasn't. This man's feet were on the floor, near the mat, but his head was high up, near the roof! The boy had never seen anyone like that before. Realizing he had seen a ghost, the boy leapt up and rushed screaming into the prayer hall. When the warden heard this story, he thrashed the boy and made him sit for prayer. The boy's shivers did not stop. Our prayer continued.

Ghost Who Came to Dinner

One day, we sat in rows, waiting for dinner to be served. A student became suspicious about the person sitting next to him. He had never seen him before. He looked at his face and it seemed normal. His misgivings not put to rest, he glanced at his feet. They were not only three times the normal length, but also flipped backwards. He let out a scream,

‘Ghost, ghost.’ The boys ran helter-skelter. After the night meal, students would tell ghost stories till they fell asleep. They would then dream of ghosts.

Marakunna

An adventurous boy called Marakunna lived in the Malavalli region. He was not afraid of ghosts. He would sleep on haystacks, all by himself, during the harvest season. He had a good chopper. He always slept with that chopper by his side.

One night, some ghosts stole in and snatched his chopper. To make things worse, they gathered around him and started singing ‘Marakunna gave us the chopper, suyyo suyyo’. The chopper changed hands from ghost to ghost. Marakunna woke up. He looked around. Ghosts mocking him and dancing with his chopper in their hands! He did not panic. He joined in and started dancing to their steps. The ghosts were delighted. The moment the chopper came to his hand, he caught hold of a ghost by its hair, pulled out a strand and secured it between his thighs. The other ghosts fled. The ghost he had caught became his slave. He got it to do plenty of work, from ploughing the fields to building a house. His friendship and compassion for the ghost grew. He returned its hair and sent it back.

When those from the Malavalli region told this story, a student called Mari from Madikeri used to say there were twenty to thirty wailing ghosts in a tree on the way to his town. An accident had killed all passengers in a bus. They had become ghosts and taken refuge in that tree. ‘After nightfall, they start wailing,’ he would say in a trembling voice. Our minds were filled with spooks and fear. If a stranger came to the hostel at night, we would first look at his feet to check whether he was a man or a ghost. If his feet were not flipped backwards and if his eyes were not in his temples, we were reassured that he was not a ghost.

God Who Got a Dichchi

I was in Room No. 24, ten feet in breadth and fifty in length. Forty students stayed in it. Each of us had a mat and a trunk. We usually sat on the mat, beside the trunk, reading or doing something.

One evening, the mat I was sitting on started swelling in the middle. It rose so high that it was about to break in two. I could see why. My neighbour was pushing his huge trunk against my mat. He was using all his strength. My temper rose. Several times, I asked him to stop. He was older than me and strong too. He just sniggered and continued his encroachment. I didn’t know what to do. I was seriously worried about my mat.

The boys of Srirampuram used to give a dichchi first before they went for a fight with anyone. They would then make contact with their hands. I had seen a lot of dichchi-giving. One grabs the collar of the opponent, rears up and forcefully rams the opponent's nose with his forehead. This is what they call a dichchi. Blood streams down the opponent's nose. A dichchi meant just the beginning of a fight in this area. I thought of trying out a dichchi on the fellow who was troubling me.

I picked a quarrel with him and he pounced on me. Being shorter was an advantage – I leapt up and gave him a dichchi. He wasn't expecting one. His plan was to bash me up. He was not educated in the dichchi skill. Blood oozed out of his nose. He was shell-shocked. Instead of hitting me back, he started dancing around strangely. He ground his teeth, making a nora-nora sound. He started shrieking and making noises like 'ha-ho'. His body began trembling. A friend from his town saw what was happening and cried out, 'He is possessed.'

Many boys gathered. They said he used to be possessed back home. Because of my dichchi, the deity had come over him that day. The boys helped him sit and begged his forgiveness. They lit incense sticks. He continued trembling. I stood around in dread. My friends told me to go out and come back after a while and not to worry as they were on my side. I loitered around and returned to the room after several hours. The possession had subsided.

Many from the possessed boy's town stayed in the hostel. They were senior students. They had called a meeting to dispense justice. They led me into the room as an offender. Three friends, my room-mates, followed me in. They were Srirampura students who were dichchi experts. They told me not to lose heart and promised to give a taste of dichchi to anyone who dared to raise a hand against me.

The senior students interrogated me in detail. I explained what had happened to my mat. They asked me whether he was already possessed when he had pushed the mat. I told them he wasn't. Didn't you give him a dichchi when he was possessed, they asked. I said no. They confirmed that I had not insulted the deity. They told me my neighbour was a holy person, warned me to be careful and let me go.

Switching Blankets

The three friends who had stood by me were older than me. After this incident, their bravado, and mine, increased manifold. We played one prank after another.

The lights in the hostel were switched off exactly at ten. Since the mains switch was off, the hostel was dark throughout the night. After the other students went to sleep, the four of us would get up to our mischief. A group of students had fought over something and stopped talking. They had become permanent enemies. We identified two

individuals within these enemy groups. Two of us went to one of those boys, made sure he was asleep, loosened his blanket and snuck it away. The other two sat by the side of his enemy and took his blanket away too. Without making the slightest noise, we switched their blankets and quietly went off to sleep.

The lights came on as soon as the early morning wake-up bell rang. The first to notice the changed blanket started screaming. In another corner, his enemy started screaming. They kicked their blankets and flung them away. We enjoyed the racket but did not let it show on our faces.

After this, the enemies whose blankets we had switched, neither quarrelled nor even exchanged them, disappointing us. Perhaps they liked the other's blanket and let things be. Others, realizing that it was a prank, would courteously exchange their blankets and become friends again. We then went on the hunt for newly sworn enemies. We lost much sleep in all this business of switching blankets. We used our heads a lot.

Kutum Kutum Sound

One night, as we lay awake, unable to sleep and with no blanket-switching to do, we heard a curious sound. Something was going kutum kutum. What was this sound in the middle of the night? We suspected it must be a ghost's work. We finally gathered enough courage and traced the source of the sound.

A boy had visited his hometown and returned with home-made snacks such as chakkuli and kodubale. If he ate them during the day, he would have had to share it around. He didn't like that idea. He felt the right time to eat the snacks was in the dark when everyone else was asleep. His kutum kutum sound continued for a long time. We felt we should go to him and ask him to give us the eats, or snatch them away from him. That could have led to a scene, so we kept quiet and went to sleep.

When we woke up in the morning, the night's kutum kutum sound continued to haunt us. We found it impossible to free ourselves from its hold. All four of us bunked school that day. We stayed back in our room and shut all doors and windows. One of us went and fetched a nail from somewhere. With some effort, we opened the boy's trunk.

There was a feast inside. Kodubale, chakkuli, avalakki, tambittu and other eats, all smelling delicious! We swallowed everything, gaba gaba, like famished tigers. Our eyes then fell on other things. One of us had had no money to buy ink. When he spotted an ink bottle, he fetched his and replenished half of it. He also filled up his pen. We found some washing and bath soap and did our own washing and bathing. We then saw a bottle of castor oil. We helped ourselves to it and were filled with bliss as we smeared our heads with the oil.

By the time that unfortunate boy returned, we had ironed our clothes—washed with his soap—and were looking like new men. The moment he came back, he opened his trunk and started yelling and beating his mouth, making a labo-labo sound. As we stood by him, being generously sympathetic and pointing fingers at various boys, he didn't suspect us of anything.

Another night, we heard a kachak kachak sound. We were all ears and became aware of a boy eating something in the dark. As before, we missed classes the next day. We shut the doors and windows and opened the lock of his trunk to find five or six apples! We ate them up quickly.

That day, a boy objected that he hadn't got a proper share. The trunk owner started wailing when he came back from school and found the apples missing. The disgruntled boy squealed on us to the warden. We said he too had been an accomplice. The warden punished us severely. That was the end of these adventures.

Boosa Incident

At this juncture, the Basavalingappa incident took place. They call it the boosa episode. With his provocative statements, B. Basavalingappa had become a controversial minister in the Devaraj Urs Cabinet. He once said Gandhiji didn't know the meaning of truth. This amazed many people. On another occasion, he told the dalits to fling gods' pictures into the gutter. This shocked the traditionalists. On yet another occasion, he said much of Kannada literature was boosa, meaning cattle feed. His remark sparked the boosa agitation. Students demanded that he should resign. The agitation did not cool off even after Basavalingappa had offered a clarification. The upper castes and some leaders in his own Congress party were opposed to him.

One day, a car arrived at our hostel. Basavalingappa had sent word for me. I went and met him. He had not lost hope. He told me about the agitating students and said some students should issue a statement in his favour. I agreed, and in consultation with D.R. Nagaraj and other friends, issued one. The trouble, instead of subsiding, got worse. But our statement prompted dalit and progressive students all over the state to agitate in favour of Basavalingappa.

The responsibility of rallying dalit students and organizing our procession fell mostly on me. With the exception of the dalits, people in general were opposed to Basavalingappa. They were convinced that he was anti-God, anti-Kannada and anti-Gandhi. When I was organizing students at the hostel, Kalegowda Nagawara arrived. Basavalingappa and Kalegowda were very old acquaintances. Basavalingappa had written to Kalegowda and called him over to Bangalore. He had come to our hostel to guide us.

One night, a secret meeting of Basavalingappa's supporters took place at Olympus Hostel. There was fear in the air. Rivals were likely to attack the meeting. I met Ki Ram Nagaraj at the meeting. He was then a lecturer at National College and a supporter of progressive movements.

We marched in procession to express our support for Basavalingappa. After our procession, our opponents were to take out theirs. Twenty thousand were lined up on that side. Our procession had about 3,000. A clash was imminent. 'Let them clash, let's see what happens,' Basavalingappa had said. I didn't think that was a good idea. I quickly ended the public meeting and indicated that the students should leave for their hostels immediately. Aswathnarayana, a student leader, rescued me from those waiting to hit me. The early end to our meeting displeased Basavalingappa. He took me to task. I told him, in all humility, that we wanted to express support for him and not take part in a clash.

Basavalingappa's thinking was insightful. His aim was to shock a stagnant society. He frequently made statements that jolted and aroused people. At times, he would say scalding things in a soft, natural tone. He had to resign from his ministerial position because of pressure from the traditionalists, his political rivals and the agitation. His resignation made him very popular among the dalit classes.

Basavalingappa was ambitious. He aspired to become president of India. He wanted to play the role of Rama but society pressed him to play Anjaneya. He did not like Anjaneya's role. Being a rebel, he chose the role of Ravana.

Gods in Lock-up

Basavalingappa handed in his resignation but some students continued with their mischief. They started forcibly smearing religious marks, like the nama and vibhuti, on the foreheads of passers-by. If they suspected that someone was an atheist, they sought in writing from him that God existed. Scared, some students wrote that God existed and that they had seen him.

To prove that God did exist, the believers marched in a procession, dressed up like gods and with nama and vibhuti marks smeared on their foreheads. They violated prohibitory orders in front of Mysore Bank. In just a few moments, these modern-day gods were sitting in a lock-up.

Most of Basavalingappa's supporters were Tamils. They marched on the streets to show their support, holding placards in Kannada. A board said 'Victory to casteists' and 'Down with caste opponents'. I objected. Basavaraj, a Kannadiga, had written those placards for them. He was an activist then, and was murdered later. The Tamil fraternity and Basavaraj argued in favour of the placards. They said it meant victory to

those of our caste and defeat for those who opposed it. 'Wouldn't it amount to being casteist, when we are agitating for the destruction of caste?' I asked. They finally changed the placards.

Ooru Keri (Part 2): Excerpts

Translated by M. Madhava Prasad

Difference of Opinion in DSS

The State Committee of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti met in Kalanakatte near Bhadravathi. Most of the leaders participated. Some district secretaries were of the opinion that Marxists were casteist and that, in future, there should be no joint programmes with them. They demanded a resolution to this effect. I opposed it. I argued that all progressive forces should work together. My friends did not like this argument. Marxists only believe in class struggle. They are an obstacle to the struggle for eradication of caste. They have no sympathy whatsoever for the dalit struggle. Confusion is the aim of communism, joked one member. I believe in the dalit struggle, I emphasized. My friends, who labelled me a Marxist supporter, were determined to pass the resolution against joint programmes. I stuck to my stand. As the debate was turning into mutual accusations, S. Ganesan and K. Ramaiah spoke up supporting me. They ensured that the organization's unity was not broken because of conflicting opinions. But the next day, criticism of Marxists and my Marxist sympathies continued. I did not have any bitter feelings against those who criticized me.

N. Muniswami's Marriage

N. Muniswami's simple marriage took place in the same village. This was a convention-defying marriage. The villagers, who had never seen such a wedding, had gathered in large numbers. Can you really conduct a marriage in this fashion, they wondered. There was no blaring of wedding music, there were no priests, no chanting of mantras, no rites and rituals. The villagers were not prepared to believe this was a wedding. They were curious. I delivered a speech at the wedding. In the old days, when a marriage was to be fixed, elders would go to see the prospective bride. Their chappals would wear out in this search for a bride. They had to undergo all kinds of trials in order to fix a marriage. Through this simple marriage, we have reduced the difficulties of the elders. We have saved their chappals from wearing out, I said

humorously. Instead of getting angry, the elders gathered there laughed uproariously. Encouraged by this, I said there was no need to consult an astrologer to fix a wedding time; they are liars, or ignorant people. To drive the point home, I told a story that Periyar Ramaswami Naicker had narrated during a visit to Bangalore.

The Astrologer's Daughter

A boy and a girl were in love. They were young, passionate. But they were scared of what would happen to them if their parents came to know of their love. This fear haunted them and they would become helpless. The boy then had an idea. He said he would consult a good astrologer. They decided to abide by whatever the astrologer said. The boy went to the astrologer. Having collected his fee in advance, the astrologer asked what the problem was. 'I am in love with a girl,' he said. 'If our parents come to know of it, we will be in trouble; we don't know how to proceed and we want you to show us the way,' he appealed. The astrologer laughed. 'It is a simple problem, the solution is very easy,' he said. The boy begged him to reveal the solution. 'You have only done what everybody does. The quickest solution is that, before sunset today, you should leave the village and go away.' The boy's confidence was revived. He ran. He picked up the girl and the two of them went away. Meanwhile, the astrologer counted his earnings at the end of the day and returned home. His daughter was not at home. He searched, he got others to search. She was nowhere to be found. He began to suspect that the boy who had sought his advice in the morning might be his son-in-law. He was right. His own astrological wisdom had struck back at him.

This story had a good effect on the gathering. They began to realize the meaninglessness of blind belief. They all supported the simple marriage and blessed the couple.

Sleeping At the Bus Stand

At Kalanakatte, I met Channanna Walikar, who had also come to the DSS meeting. In the middle of all the pro- and anti-Marxist disputations, he was discussing village deities with me. He gave me some good suggestions for the classification of village deities. That night, we walked from Kalanakatte to Bhadravathi, singing revolutionary songs on the way and reached the bus stand at 11 p.m. People got onto buses or lorries and left for their homes. K. Ramaiah and I waited for the bus to Bangalore.

There was no bus to Bangalore for a long time. No lorries either. My eyes were tired and sleepy. I took out a newspaper from my shoulder bag and started to spread it on the floor. Ramaiah tried to dissuade me. He preferred to wait for the bus and get to Bangalore first. But sleep was dragging me down. I went to sleep in the bus stand. The

sharp cold of the morning woke me. I saw Ramaiah sleeping nearby, on a spread-out newspaper. I went back to sleep. In the morning, we caught a bus and reached Bangalore.

A Drop in the Ocean of Humanity

A dalit conference was held in Doddaballapur. As usual, I was one of the speakers. We were to go in a procession to the town hall, a distance of two kilometres. I reached the place from where we were to set out. Some of the organizers told me that I need not walk in the sun and advised me to go straight to the town hall. I refused and insisted on walking with the procession. They then asked me to walk at the head of the procession, as I was the chief guest. I refused again. I told them I would walk with the rest as I pleased. They liked this and left me alone. I joined the crowd of thousands marching in three columns. Men, women and children were marching with gusto. Their slogans rent the sky. My favourite slogan, 'The poor of all castes are dalits' was heard frequently there. They were singing my songs, making me feel proud for having written them. I moved along like a drop in the ocean of humanity. To one side of me, a woman was marching, shouting slogans, a small baby in her arms. It must have been a year old. Her enthusiasm was admirable. Maybe there was no one at home to leave the child with, I thought to myself. A fortunate child, to enter the path of struggle at such a young age. That sister noticed that I was looking at the child. Her arms must have been aching from carrying the child. 'Please carry the baby for a while, brother,' she said and transferred it to me. I took the child and continued to march along. She felt relieved. She marched on, shouting slogans louder than ever.

When we reached the town hall, the woman took the child. I got up on the dais and gave a passionate speech. The gathering responded to my speech with enthusiasm. D.R. Nagaraj, who was sitting next to me on the dais said, 'Poet, sir [kavigale], you spoke very powerfully, the whole hall was shaking when you were speaking. People found it hard to believe that a thin fellow like you could speak like that. You need to put on some weight,' he joked. But someone else sitting to the other side of him tried to console me: 'No, a poet must remain this. Charu Majumdar was thin and short.' This guest was a Naxalite sympathizer. If D.R. Nagaraj had joked about my figure in a tone of intimacy, the Naxalite sympathizer had constructed an ideological justification for it! While we were thus speaking softly on stage, I noticed a woman in the audience looking guiltily at me. She was the one who had given me her child to carry and marched and sloganeered gustily. I could see in her eyes that she was feeling awkward for having asked a celebrity to carry her child and it was mixed with pride that such a person had carried her child. I did not feel there was anything wrong in her giving me the child and my carrying it. Not being used to carrying children for long periods, I had felt some

discomfort but it had pleased me. Because my parents were labourers and I come from the working class, this feeling has remained alive in me. This mindset has saved me from all kinds of mental disturbances stemming from false prestige. But the remarks about my figure made on the stage were not to be dismissed. Was it my appearance and my simple clothes that encouraged that sister to ask me to carry her child? Maybe. I feel a sense of pride about my figure and clothes which have united me with the poor ordinary people of this country and set me apart from the ranks of the special people.

Why AK?

When I was thus absorbed in my thoughts, a local woman dalit leader climbed on to the dais and, taking the mike, began her speech. She was not educated, but her speech was forthright, sincere. She spoke more spontaneously than the other leaders. Somehow, one thing she said that day has remained in my memory. It may seem like a simple thing, a humorous aside. Maybe that's why it has come to be etched in my memory. What seemed humorous then began to take on serious connotations in time. 'Why do people of other castes call our people AK?' she asked. Everybody knows that 'AK' is the English abbreviation of the term 'Adi Karnataka'. But the lady speaker gave a very different explanation. 'Our people never used to accept anything without question. Even now they don't. Whatever it may be, God, caste, untouchability, injustice, atrocity—they always ask the people above them, "Why [eke] do you do this?" The people above are unable to answer, they look bewildered. Therefore, getting tired of being asked "eke? eke?", they have named the entire community the "AK people",' she concluded. Although at the time it seemed like a joke, there seems to be something more philosophical hidden in the local leader's words. Dalits are the rebels who questioned the reactionary values of society. That sister had innocently given voice to this. Today, it is painful to witness educated dalits voluntarily submitting themselves to reactionary values.

'Khadgavagali Kavya'

The Bandaya Sahitya Sanghatane was constituted on the lawns in front of the Central College library. Rebel writers had gathered there and had decided to boycott the Kannada Sahitya Parishat's conference and to conduct a rebel literature conference. Kalegowda Nagawara, C.G. Krishnaswamy, D.R. Nagaraj, Ramadev Rake, Baraguru Ramachandrappa, Sudra Srinivas and I were named the organizers. A handbill explaining the need for a rebel literature conference and inviting all writers to it was prepared. It was D.R. Nagaraj's handiwork, in which he had asserted the need for writers to rise in revolt against the dominant culture. 'May poetry become a sword, a friend who voices the pain of the poor'—this line stood out. The word 'pranamitra' (life friend) was added by Kalegowda Nagawara. Indudhara Honnapura, S. Ganeshan,

Vijaya Patil and many other progressive writers were actively involved in organizing the conference. Dr Marulasiddappa made the first donation of Rs 50. We received support from writers and progressive people from all over the state. Statements were published in the press in our support. Many criticized us too. D.R. Nagaraj, Kalegowda Nagawara, Baraguru Ramachandrappa and I were working at the Kannada Studies Centre (of Bangalore University). Dr G. Sivarudrappa was then the director of the centre. The then president of the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, Ham Pa Nagarajaiah, was also a professor in the centre. Dr Sivarudrappa and Professor Nagarajaiah had had some personal differences. Some people wrote in the papers that four of the organizers of the rebel literature conference were in the Kannada Studies Centre, that they were chamchas of Sivarudrappa, that the latter was instigating them against Nagarajaiah and so on. This statement was a blow to our self-respect. We managed to swallow our pride and concentrated on the work. But some of our students could not tolerate the affront. They gave a press statement that those who opposed us were being childish. A flood of statements for and against began. Some threatened to stage a dharna in front of the rebel literature conference if it were held. A perverse curiosity about the conference was growing all over the state.

We decided to invite the revolutionary poet of Andhra, Sri Sri, the writer K.V. Ramana Reddy, the Maharashtrian dalit writers Daya Pawar and Arjun Dangle, the fighter and writer Godavari Parulekar, the socialist thinker C.G.K. Reddy, besides Niranjana and Devanoora Mahadeva.

Devanoora's Refusal

When I went to invite Devanoora Mahadeva to the conference, he refused. 'This is just the Kannada Studies Centre's internal politics, arising from the quarrel between Sivarudrappa and Hampanna; I don't want to take part in it,' he said. He must have read the statements about the conference in the press. In this matter, his stand was clear. He was not into public speaking. And when we asked him to deliver the inaugural address, he felt all the more awkward. We had decided that instead of making someone preside over the conference, we would have an inaugural address. When Mahadeva refused, I was afraid that the Bandaya conference would lose its importance. At the meeting in Bangalore, I had taken on the responsibility of convincing Mahadeva and bringing him to the conference. Without him, the conference would have lost its sheen. I was despondent. Devanoora Mahadeva is as firm as he is gentle. He is the embodiment of humanity but never one to succumb to the pressure of circumstances; he always speaks his mind clearly. Determined to convince him, I stayed on in Mysore and met him again the next day and explained that there was no relation between the Kannada Studies Centre politics and the rebel literature conference. Mahadeva seemed to soften up a

little. Although we were G.S. Sivarudrappa's students, he never tried to use us against others. Finally, Mahadeva, though still reluctant, agreed to speak at the conference. His acceptance gave strength to the rebels. Some dalit writers from Tumkur gave a press statement that they were going to boycott the Bandaya conference. Their charge was that some people were setting up a new category of rebel literature with the intention of putting down dalit literature. The next day I went to Tumkur, arranged a meeting of dalit students and writers and explained the importance of rebel literature. They accepted my explanation.

Channanna Walikar's Anger

In this connection, B. Krishnappa and I were interviewed by *Kannada Prabha*. The interview went well but in the course of it, I said 'untouchables and dalits' by mistake. This was printed. Channanna Walikar read this and got angry. 'Does that mean I am not a dalit,' he said with pain. He threatened to boycott the rebel literature conference. Since he had already arrived in Bangalore for the conference, there was not much he could do. As soon as I heard of it, I went to meet him. He was sitting in a corner of the Devanga Kalyana Mantapa behind the corporation building. I asked for his forgiveness. He was placated and actively involved himself in the conference.

We had been forewarned that our opponents were planning to cause disturbance on the first day of the conference. I met E. Aswathnarayana two days before the inauguration. He was then, as he continues to be, a very active person. He was a member of the Congress party from the beginning. Ours was not a pro-government event. Aswathnarayana liked our ideas. I told him that there was a threat of disruption by our opponents, and asked him to be with us throughout the conference as a volunteer. He and his friends took an active interest and saw to everything from cooking to keeping out disruptive elements. Even before the inauguration, some people gathered before the Devanga Kalyana Mantapa and started shouting slogans against Bandaya literature and writers. They held placards. As soon as they saw P. Jagannath of Raita Sangha and Aswathnarayana, they fled from the scene. It is ironic that we, who were organizing a conference on protest literature, had to face a protest ourselves. Their slogans did not contain any serious accusations. It was mainly the worry about creating an alternative forum to Sahitya Parishat that had provoked their protest.

Sri Sri

Sri Sri, who inaugurated the conference, spoke magnificently. Sri Sri is India's finest revolutionary poet. He had come from Madras for the inauguration. I had heard about him, read his works but not seen him. Having arrived the day before, he was staying at

Satkar Hotel. On the morning of the first day, I went to his room. He was quite old and not in good health. He was sitting on the bed, wearing an old sweater. It looked like he had had a drink in the morning. I was worried whether he would be able to deliver the inaugural lecture. As soon as he came and got on to the dais, though, he perked up. He gave a great speech. It is a matter of great pride that he came to Karnataka and gave his support to the rebel writers. Professor Nagari Babaiah had gone to Madras to bring Sri Sri to Bangalore.

K.V. Ramana Reddy

Another guest from Andhra at the conference was K.V. Ramana Reddy. Some years ago, Kannada writer and folklorist Professor Krishnamurthy Hanur told me a story about Ramana Reddy. Hanur had gone to Andhra as part of a Karnataka Sahitya Akademi project. He was supposed to meet writers from outside the state and exchange views with them. He wanted to meet Reddy. He got hold of the address and arrived at Reddy's house. It was evening. Hanur had not seen Reddy before. Reddy did not know Hanur either. When he did meet Reddy, Hanur tried to introduce himself. Reddy did not show much interest. He gave him dinner and arranged for him to sleep in a room in the house. Hanur was worried that the man was not even asking his name. In the morning, Reddy made arrangements for Hanur's bath. They had breakfast. Not many words escaped Reddy's lips all through this. Leaving Hanur at home, Reddy went away to his college to teach and came back in the afternoon. Lunch was organized. After lunch, having sat down in a relaxed fashion with Hanur, Reddy asked, 'What is your name? Where are you from?' Literature, society, struggle, they talked about many such topics. Reddy was pleased to hear that Hanur had come as part of a project to exchange ideas with Andhra writers. When Hanur told me this story, I remember thinking that it takes all kinds to make a world. Reddy did not need to know Hanur's identity. His way of giving him hospitality for a day before finding out who he was seemed very peculiar, but also very humane. Ramana Reddy was involved in the Andhra revolutionary movement and had gone to jail. By the time he came to the conference, his prison diary had been published. At the conference, he delivered a very analytical speech.

Make the Stones Grow Leaves

More than everything else at the conference, I liked Devanoora Mahadeva's speech. It was full of insights, yet simple. The rebel literature conference was hastily organized, he said. It was a baby born prematurely at seven months. But when he said we must make the stones grow leaves, his words touched everybody. Arjun Dangle and Daya Pawar had come from Maharashtra. Daya Pawar is a big writer, a simple man. Arjun Dangle is a good critic. Godavari Parulekar, fighter and author of *When Humanity*

Awakens, spoke inspiringly. Parulekar, who had organized the adivasis of Maharashtra and sowed the seeds of awareness in them found many admirers among Kannada writers. Kannada's great novelist Niranjana made a heartfelt speech and wished all success to the conference. Professor Chandrashekhar Patil spoke and reminded us of Lankesh's remark about Adiga, that he was 'a poet who opened the eyes of a nation'. Saying that he was going to slightly amend Lankesh's words, he said sarcastically that Adiga had opened only one eye of the nation.

Disturbance at the Poets' Meet

I presided over the poets' meet on the last day. There was a lot of competition to read poetry. They had recommendations from many poets. To avoid any problems, I said only those whose names were printed in the invitation would be allowed to read. Some extreme rebels had argued that 'quality poets' should not be included, just because they were 'quality poets'; they succeeded in having their way. Thanks to them, many progressive poets' names had not appeared on the invitation. They were sitting in the audience without showing any signs of discontent. When I saw this, I announced that I would be calling some of them, to which the same extremists protested. I fell quiet, anxious that the session should conclude without problems. Four or five poets read their poems. Suddenly, there were shouts of 'dhikkara'. 'Down with rebel writers' was the slogan. It was coming from the middle of the hall. Our opponents had come and occupied seats in the middle of the audience. Some others who were sitting elsewhere also shouted slogans and started rushing towards me. I was scared. Some innocents in the audience tried to flee. But the volunteers controlled the protesters. They encircled them and, lifting each one, physically carried them out. Their chappals were scattered here and there. Soon I recovered. To hide my panic from the audience, I said to them, 'Please do not panic. The poets' meet will continue.' Sensing my plight, Kalegowda Nagawara smiled. 'If you want to make a revolution, you have to be prepared for such things,' said D.R. Nagaraj in my ear. He must have said this in order to ensure that I did not freeze up. Kalegowda was probably watching me to see how I would handle the situation.

Poetry Reading in a Wine Shop

One evening I was sitting in a wine shop near the Kalasipalyam bus stand, drinking rum. As in many other stores, here too a long bench had been placed in a corner where customers could sit and be served liquor and boiled eggs. It was cheaper than going to bars. I had finished a peg when I noticed a TV in the corner. Something clicked in my brain and I was seized with tension. I soon realized why. It was the day that Bangalore Doordarshan was broadcasting the poetry-reading session they had recorded earlier.

The programme was going to begin in a few minutes. I asked the shop owner to switch on the TV. He declined politely. I kept on asking him and he kept refusing, saying that if customers sat there watching TV, his business would be affected … Other customers began to pay attention to our exchange out of curiosity. They thought I had had one too many. The owner took me for a troublemaker. It was my first time on TV and I was determined to watch the programme. I told him I would be appearing on TV. They were sure I was lying and began to laugh … I was down to my last weapon. 'Switch it on, if I don't appear, I will give you a hundred rupees. And if I do, you should give me a hundred,' I said. He tried to dissuade me from wasting my money. I dared him to put me to the test. The customers were enjoying the scene. They urged the owner to take the bet, assuring him he would win. He fell for it and switched on the box. Seeing me on the screen, they were amazed. They looked at the screen and then at me and ascertained that it was indeed their fellow drinker reading poetry on TV. The owner looked shocked and worried about losing a hundred rupees. But soon he recovered and started enjoying the reading, as did the other customers. They all appreciated the poems I had read. They seemed impressed. The owner offered me the hundred rupees, but I refused. He offered the equivalent in rum, but I told him I had enough money to pay for my drinks. 'It's a matter of pride that you are drinking in my wine shop,' he said. I thanked him for letting me watch the programme. The customers started ordering rum for me. If I were to accept each one's offer, I'd have trouble getting back home. I thanked them and left.

N. Narasimhaiah

Sira Ranganath knew a lot of people. The famous detective novelist N. Narasimhaiah was one of them. The writer Alanahalli Krishna, who was full of life in those days, had spoken derisively about Narasimhaiah. He made fun of detective fiction as a genre. Angered by this, Narasimhaiah filed a defamation suit against Krishna. The judge read the detective novelist's lawyer's complaint. Alanahalli Krishna's derogatory remarks had damaged Narasimhaiah's reputation. The sales of his novels had declined, causing a loss of lakhs of rupees. Alanahalli Krishna must tender an apology to Narasimhaiah, in addition to paying a compensation of so many lakhs. Krishna's lawyer put forth his defence. The judge ordered Krishna to appear in person. When he didn't show up for two or three hearings, he ordered the police to arrest and produce him in court. Krishna was arrested and brought to court. Sira Ranganath, being employed as a bench clerk in the same court, and knowing that Alanahalli Krishna was an important Kannada writer, intervened and brought about a settlement between the two.

One day, Ranganath took me to Narasimhaiah's house. He lived in a rented flat on the road abutting Chikkalalbagh. It was a tiny flat. He was in a happy mood, celebrating the publication of his 400th novel and welcomed us warmly. He told us the full story of his

victory over Alanahalli Krishna. We learnt that he had been a bus conductor to begin with and had resigned to become a full-time novelist when the demand for his novels increased. This creator of the adventures of Purushottama [the detective-protagonist of those novels] told us quite casually that he belonged to a dalit caste. 'You don't need a face and a label to be a writer,' he said. 'How come you don't print your photo on the cover of any of your novels?' I asked him. In reply, he said that he spent hours sitting in court, listening to lawyers' arguments, the talk and behaviour of people on the streets, in the market, in bus stands, all for the sake of collecting material for his stories. 'I don't want people to recognize me and start talking to me while I am engaged in observing them.'

Thumbadi Ramaiah

Thumbadi Ramaiah says that he is 'basically not a writer'. It was the context of the dalit movement of the 1970s and '80s that inspired him to write. 'That was a sincere movement and many non-dalit leaders were part of it. I was also influenced by non-dalit writers like Kalegowda Nagawara and my mentor, K.M. Shankarappa, a good Kannada film director,' he says.

'In my sincere opinion, most people don't try to write out of a sense of inferiority. They are hesitant to express what they feel, say who they are. So many people don't want to reveal their identity, especially their caste. In the movement, a different context arose. Many of the others wrote poems and short stories and spoke vividly about their experiences. I found it difficult to do that. So I began writing my autobiography, mainly to overcome this reticence and to come out, to declare who I am. When it was published in 1999, the response was fantastic. It surprised and truly overwhelmed me. Other writers welcomed the book; major critics like Nataraj Huliyar praised it; *Lankesh Patrike* carried a review. Readers wrote to say they were touched and moved by it; they said it reminded them of their own lives.'

Thumbadi Ramaiah was born in 1954, in Tumbadi, a village in Tumkur district, where he also did his primary schooling. His father was a cobbler and agricultural worker. He studied in Tumkur for his BA, which he did in 1978 and completed his LLB from Bangalore University in 1981. He was inspired by the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti and actively participated in its work alongside writers such as K.B. Siddaiah, then a lecturer in Tumkur, and Devanoora Mahadeva. He also wrote for *Lankesh Patrike*. Ramaiah is a founder member of the Nagarjuna Pattina Sahakara Sangha, an organization that worked with dalits and other poor people, and an active worker in Chalana Prakashana Sahakari, a literary organization that published important books related to the movement. In the 1980s, Ramaiah published a number of articles in the key DSS journal, *Panchama*. The first volume of his autobiography, *Manegara*, is regarded as a landmark in dalit autobiographical works. Manegara is the name of his caste community. The second volume, which appeared in 2007, is titled *Mutthinajola* (Pearly Millet). He has also been writing short stories, and will publish a collection soon.

Currently a labour officer in the Labour Department of the Karnataka government, he plans to take up writing more seriously after he retires. The excerpts that follow are

from his autobiography and also serve to flesh out this biographical note.

Manegara: Excerpts

Translated by Maithreyi K.R.

The Body in Tumbadi's New Lake

'Why do you look so weary, young lady? Look at me. I have borne fourteen children and yet I am so active!' my mother would announce proudly, chiding the girls alongside whom she worked as a farmhand. If anyone bothered to probe further, she would go into details: 'I gave birth to fourteen, but only eight of them are alive. Six of my children died—most of them within six months to a year of being born. Only one of them died when he was old enough to start earning.'

The eight who survived were (in this order): my oldest brother Rangappa, my sister Muddunagamma, brother Chikkarangaiah, then me, the fifth was my sister Lakshmamma, brother Nagaraj, brother Chikkappaiah and finally my little sister Puttarangamma.

My mother was from Bukkapatna near Koratagere. Her father, my grandfather, was Ailu Kempirappa. He was a ruddy-complexioned, broad-shouldered giant of a man with a voice to match. Dressed in a knee-length white dhoti and a red turban (as customary of our manegara—the madigas in my area are called manegara—men), he resembled a warrior.

Most of the administration, including the village leadership in Bukkapatna, was in the hands of talawaras (called naiks elsewhere). One of the eight main goddesses of that area was in Bukkapattna and the talawaras were her priests. We manegaras matched the talawars in numbers (the rest of the village was made up of people from other backward castes), but we were not allowed into the Doddamma temple. Neither were we allowed to enter the temple of Veeranagamma in Vaddagere, near my village Tumbadi Gollahalli. We still aren't. Even so, manegaras remain devotees of Doddamma and Veeranagamma.

The only person who shared the same status, in terms of respect and social standing as the talawaras, was my grandfather, Kempirappa. It was said that he was a prominent member of the local panchayat and was involved in settling disputes in most villages in that area. My sister Muddunagamma was married to my grandfather's brother's son. When I was studying in the high school in Koratagere, I would visit my sister in Bukkupatna often. Every time I visited them, my grandfather would have meat cooked

for me. Though he preferred buffalo meat himself, we would have chicken when I visited. 'My grandson studies in the high school,' he would announce to everyone, proudly.

I am the first person, from either side of the family, to have completed high school. But before me, my brother Veeranagappa had also attended high school. He was an attractive and well-built young man, straightforward and outspoken. He always said what he thought and spoke out his mind on anything he felt strongly about, regardless of whom he was addressing. This attitude was considered arrogant and had earned him the antagonism of several teachers. As a result, they failed my brother twice in the eighth class for no reason. My father did not understand all this and kept silent. My brother, who knew this to be the work of some casteist teachers, burnt with resentment inside, but suffered helplessly. He grew dejected and depressed by the day and stopped talking. My father, who couldn't take my brother's suffering, prayed to all the gods possible, made all kinds of offerings and pujas, but nothing seemed to work. Finally, my father made a mighty effort and enrolled my brother back in high school. My brother still did not recover. He would skip school and spend most of his days sitting on the wall surrounding Tumbadi's new lake. I was too young to understand my brother's bitterness and his deep sense of shame. One day, my brother did not return home. My already distressed father panicked even more. He went looking for him all over the place; he went to the houses of all his relatives and friends, hoping to find my brother there. Three days later, somebody noticed a dead body floating around in the lake. When my father heard this, his face fell. He started crying softly. He finally went to the lake to take a look at the body. The body had bloated beyond recognition, but going by its clothes, my father could tell that it was my brother's body.

My mother was inconsolable on hearing this; the earth seemed to give way beneath her feet. She took one look at the unrecognizable body of my brother and cried piteously. She grabbed handfuls of earth and poured it over herself hysterically. 'Have you seen my son, O people? He is such a dear boy. Oh God, why were my accursed eyes fated to see him dead!' she shrieked over and over. She implored everyone present to bring her son back to life.

'My son is not dead … just like Arjuna who came disguised as an ascetic to meet his mother Kunti, so my son will come to see me,' she would say. Whenever an ascetic or a tramp came begging for food, she would stand staring at him quietly. She would wait for boys of my brother's age returning from school in the evening and watch them with great absorption.

My Father's Various Avatars

Long after my mother stopped having children, the government started a compulsory sterilization programme throughout the country, thanks to Sanjay Gandhi. My father got himself operated for the sake of the money that was offered. I remember how he had carried back the food that was given to him at the operation camp in a cloth and fed us kids.

Like Vishnu's ten avatars, father donned several roles each day to feed us—he worked at one job in the morning, another in the afternoon, yet another in the evening, all to feed our hungry stomachs.

Chappal-making

Among these many vocations, stitching chappals was my father's main occupation. While he wasn't exactly unmatched in this skill, he'd chosen this work as a fairly reliable way to make a living. Every Wednesday, he would bring on loan from the Muslim traders in Madhugiri the leather and strips of tyre necessary for making new chappals. From his earnings that week, he would repay the loan from the previous week. It was the same pattern every week; an unending cycle of debt. His debts were never fully paid, nor our hunger completely quelled! Such was our state.

My father never softened the leather before stitching the chappals. He would cut the fresh leather and the tyre to the required size, and with the leather on top and the tyre at the bottom, he would insert a sheet of cardboard—bought from the local grocery store and cut in the same shape as the other two—between them. He would glue the lot together with sticky clay from a lake in the neighbouring village, Gouraganahalli. Once a month, I would go with boys from the neighbourhood to fetch this clay for him. There were only three people in the village who made chappals. Among them, only my father's older brother, Chikkanagappa, had learnt some new styles.

On days that father worked in the villages, he was paid in food grains—ragi, paddy, jowar—rather than cash. He would also pester the villagers into giving him grass for our cattle. Then, bundling up the grass along with his leather working tools, he'd carry it back on his head. The grain and the flour, sometimes even cooked rice, given to him would be tied in separate pouches in his head-cloth and slung over his shoulders. In addition to this, he would pick up dry twigs and sticks from the roadside and bring them home. The sight of my father walking home, dwarfed under this weight, reminded one of Hanuman carrying Mount Sanjeevani on his back. But for a man burdened with a family of eight children, the weight of these bundles was nothing.

My father went mostly to Pemmedevarahalli, Tumbadi and Ettugoanahalli villages and the Lambada settlements to make his chappals. He had to make it to the Lambada settlements as early as six o'clock in the mornings to catch his customers before they set

out for work, which was carrying bricks and stones mostly. On days off from school, I would accompany my father on his chappal-making journeys. I would do odd jobs like sewing the toe-ring on, driving nails into the soles and putting little stitches here and there. Repairing the chappals of my townsfolk was torture! They were so worn-out that sometimes the whole heel was missing, and at other times, there would be so little material left that there was no space for the stitches. Some of them were so hard and dry that they'd have to be soaked in water for a half-hour before we even attempted to repair them.

My father would even go to the camps of nomadic shepherd tribes that came from places near Sira and pitched their tents in pre-marked fields. They would usually come to a neighbouring village, Kurudaganahalli, which was about a kilometre and a half away. These people travelled long distances, tending their sheep and their chappals would be heavily worn. Knowing this, father would go wherever they were to repair their chappals.

Rearing Pigs

Another of my father's important occupations was pig-rearing. My father's pigs were the best in town and were the most sought-after in all the neighbouring villages. Pig-rearing was a very profitable business. Unlike cattle and sheep, pigs didn't need grazing and careful looking after. The pigs would find their own food in the garbage pits and drains of the village; it wouldn't cost my father anything to maintain them. Moreover, since each pig had many piglets a year, their numbers were always on the rise. On the days when one of my father's pigs was slaughtered, the whole village wore a festive atmosphere. The only time my father had any trouble with his pigs was on days we had Babayyana Jatre [the fair of the local Muslim saint] in the village. On such days, the pigs had to be kept out of the village and slaughtering of pigs was prohibited.

Not everyone in our madiga colony ate pork; only a handful of us did. The pots and pans for cooking pork were kept separately in attics and brought down when needed; the cooking was done on open fires outside the house. In our family, only my parents ate pork. Earlier, only my mother did. It was said that when we kids were still young, my father had fallen grievously ill; when no medicine seemed to work, the local folk doctor had recommended pork as the only solution. Since then my father started eating pork.

My family kept up the business of pig-rearing until after I completed college at Tumkur. My father would make me tend to the pigs when I came home for my vacations.

Agriculture

My father treated agriculture as secondary to all his other jobs. He owned only about an acre and a half of land. He also share-cropped an acre of Tumbadi Subbanna's land. In addition to this, he had four acres near Ettugonahalli village, allotted to him by the government as part of a scheme for poor farmers. Since this land was rather far from our village, he cultivated it half-heartedly. Finally, he sold the land for just 800 rupees to repay a loan taken for my elder brother Rangappa's wedding! And that was only for the principal; to pay the interest on the loan, he used my other elder brother, Chikkarangaiah, as a bonded labourer at the house of Tumbadi Subbanna of the bestha [fisherfolk] caste. Chikkarangaiah ran back home within six months. Tumbadi Subbanna began pestering my father for the interest he owed him. For this, my father handed over our cow and its calf to Subbanna. When that wasn't enough to satisfy him, he gave him the buffalo calf as well! My mother and I were very attached to the cow and its calf. The cow gave a big tumbler of milk twice a day. This cow, so dear to us, had been dragged over and tied in front of Tumbadi Subbanna's house and we watched helplessly as his people milked it.

Miscellaneous Occupations

Father also made big leather bags, called kapile-bani, used to draw water from wells to irrigate the fields. Stitching these bags was a very difficult work but it earned him almost the same amount of grain as the farmers. Once the crop was harvested and the grains threshed, the grain was divided in half; then one half into one-thirds; this third was given to the family of the bani-maker. Also, when the paddy was winnowed, we had the right to gather up the lighter grain that fell to the front. On the day of the harvest, while the bundles of stalk were doled out to the others by measure, we had the privilege of picking the ones of our choice.

The last of my father's jobs was the practice of local medicine. He would pierce the noses of cattle to string ropes into; he also made pastes and concoctions for treating bovine diseases. He had learnt all these from his father, Mantrada Mukundappa.

Despite all this work, we found it difficult to fill our bellies. My older brothers, rather than aiding my father in running the household, got married and left home. Because of this, I had to chip in to help my father earn a living. While I was still in high school, I went to work at bridge construction—breaking stones, carrying earth—stitched chappals, etc. While the boys left home one after the other, my sister Lakshmamma was a strong pillar of support for my parents. Though she was younger, she was bigger and stronger than me. People mistook me for her younger brother. She did everything from carrying heavy loads of stones and mortar to working on the farm very efficiently.

Playing the Tamate

To be involved in the village service, it was extremely important to know how to play the hand-held drum called the tamate. We manegaras had mastered this art over generations. My father wasn't exactly the best tamate player in town, but had learnt enough to be able to play when duty required it.

Manegaras were also in charge of bringing dead cattle to the colony and cutting up the carcass. The soft, thin skin lining the stomach would be stretched over a broken earthen pot and dried in the sun. When struck with sticks, this skin made the sound of the tamate. We used this contraption to practise our drum-beating. We also had another instrument to practise our skills upon—shells of coconuts broken during festivals. We fashioned small drums from these coconut shells and beat on them with sticks. Before we were old and strong enough to hoist the real tamate onto our shoulders, we would have already mastered the rhythms.

Tamate-playing is an art. The drummer gets so engrossed in it that his whole body begins to sway to the tempo of its music. Everything in the world fades away, and he is conscious of only the drum and its beat. It's like meditation! It's difficult for even the most reluctant person not to be drawn by the mesmerizing rhythms of the tamate. However, one cannot learn it overnight. It takes constant effort and a lifetime of learning. No one taught us to play the tamate as kids. We taught ourselves with dogged determination, like Ekalavya. We were required to know different beats for different occasions. For instance, there was one beat for the deity Hanuman, called the Hanuman Gasti: this one was fairly simple. Then there was one dedicated to Goddess Maramma. This was a zesty, 'non-veg' rhythm and was best played with her liquid blessing sloshing around in our stomachs.

There was also a Kaluve Gasti for the canal. This had a special purpose. In the years that the lake was full, water would be transported through canals to irrigate the fields. And during summers, the farmers got water from a tank near our village. It fell upon the farmers to supervise and maintain these canals right from the first day of cultivation, for as long as the water stayed. These canals had to be monitored constantly and one person per acre of land was deputed to do the job in rotating shifts. No one in our village had wristwatches in those days and time was kept by the beating of the Kaluve Gasti. The farmers worked their shifts on the canals according to the beating of the drums. Every year, one of three manegara men would take on this job of playing for the farmers. When the day's work began, the manegaras were at the canal site at the crack of dawn, beating the drum. The farmers would assemble at the site, following the drumbeats. If a farmer failed to appear at the assigned time, he would be fined. Once the crops were grown, everyone from the village would get together and march to Annayyana Betta—a small

hill near our village—to make offerings to the residing deity, cook and eat a feast. Thus, the beating of the Kaluve Gasti was crucial for agriculture. For this job, we were paid three measures of grain per acre of cultivated land.

My father was one of the people assigned the job of playing the canal rhythm. But since the responsibility of earning a livelihood for the family fell entirely on him, he could not go to keep time for the farmers. Whenever it was his turn to play the drum, either one of my older brothers or I had to take his place. Once I started high school, I was reluctant to play the Kaluve Gasti. I felt ashamed of doing it before boys my age. But my father wouldn't hear of it and dragged me to beat the tamate. I, and boys like me, in our confusion, would end up beating the wrong rhythm for the wrong occasion—Maramma's beat for Hanuman, the hunting beat for Maramma—and have the village elders tell us off.

I still remember that my uncle, who was the best player in the whole area, was a real gimmick man. He could lie down while playing, press the coins flung by cheering crowds onto his forehead and rise back up without missing a beat. For this, the enthralled crowds flung more coins.

The Bonds of Caste

Among the eighty families in my village, some 90 per cent were more or less alike in their lifestyles and conditions. Among these, there were nine manegara families; nine holeya families; one lingayat family; one family of hajam (barber); one tigala (Tamil speakers); seven talawaras (employed in village administration); six wadda (stone-breakers); three madiwala (washerfolk); two Jain families; among the rest of them were twenty kuruba (shepherd) and sixteen kunchitiga (farming) families. We did not have a single brahmin family in our village. The only brahmin family that resided here was said to have succumbed to some disease and disappeared without a trace. For weddings, name-giving and other ceremonies, the people of our village would consult the shanbog priests of Tumbadi—a practice that continues to this day. What was surprising was that, though our village did not have a single Muslim family, people from all castes came together to celebrate Babayyana Jatre—another tradition that is being followed even today.

There is a special reason I am describing the caste constitution in my village. Other than the one or two lingayat homes and the two Jain homes in our village, people of all other castes addressed each other with camaraderie as anna (elder brother), tamma (younger brother), akka (elder sister), tangi (younger sister), chikkappa, doddappa (uncle), taata (grandfather), atte (aunt) and so on. According to the traditions of my village, Muttamma, the wife of Beeraiah of the kuruba caste, and Narasamma, the wife of Puttarangaiah were my paternal aunts. They always addressed me as aliya (nephew).

‘Hey aliya! Don’t slack. Work hard, or I’ll whack you one!’ they’d say with affectionate familiarity when we worked together in the fields or on construction sites.

But when we went to shop at the stores owned by Parshwanathappa and Jotamma, the Jains, they would jump at the sight of us like flea-bitten cows. Jotamma’s mother Siridevamma, who was too fat to walk around much, would tie a basket to a long pole and hand us the things we needed through the window. If their children played with us, they would drag them away, slap them for their insolence and make them wash their arms and feet before entering the house. We did not understand all this and stood watching in stunned silence.

The behaviour of the holeya was even weirder. In our village, manegara and holeya had separate wells and we never drew water from each other’s wells! When holeya women came to our colony to call us for work, they’d walk as if on burning ambers; as soon as they returned to their colony, they would step on cow dung and urine to ‘cleanse’ their feet. By that time, each holeya household had at least one person in government service. Because of that, they’d stopped eating beef and buffalo meat. Even so, grandfather Tirumallappa, despite the fact that his son was a high-school teacher, had not given up his caste-based profession of scavenging. His wife, Muddakka, would come to our houses to take beef from us and eat it secretly. Bheemanna and Chikkapaiah, who were schoolteachers, came without any hesitation to our colony to get their chappals mended.

In our colony, the nine manegara families were like nine islands. Among them, the families of Sanjeevanna and Hanumanthappa had come from the south two generations ago and settled down here. The rest shared common ancestry; they were like seven branches sprung from a common root.

Pea Drought

In class five, I started going to the school in Vaddagere, a village three kilometres from mine. There was a severe drought in our region then. My elder brother, who lovingly helped me with schoolwork—he put me on his lap and taught me—had suffered from depression and killed himself by jumping into the Tumbadi lake. Owing to my brother’s death and the extreme poverty at home, continuing my education became impossible. That day, my father had buried my brother’s body behind the lake and come home to see me crying alone in a corner. Grief-stricken himself over losing a grown-up son, my father had picked me up and tried consoling me: ‘I’ll give you an education even if I have to clean toilets all my life,’ he’d vowed tearfully.

The whole village was quivering under the drought. People just about managed to keep body and soul together with the uppittu and milk powder that the government

provided. The uppittu and milk powder was distributed in the yard in the middle of the village every afternoon. Save for some eight or ten families, the rest were completely dependent on these handouts for their survival.

Delirious with hunger, people fell over each other to grab the food. It seemed like they had almost given up all hope of life, if not for this meagre meal provided by the government. Neerganti Muddappa, who was responsible for distributing the uppittu, would toss handfuls at the restless crowd, which seemed to want to devour the pots themselves if given a chance. We would pick the uppittu off our clothes and bodies carefully, and eat it without wasting a single grain. Because of the failed rains, we could not even muster a morsel of decent food during festivals. The government undertook a programme to dig wells in the fields and provided temporary employment to the people, paying us in maida rather than cash. The people unsure of its use would mix it with jaggery and make porridge. In those days, peas were all one could get in the shops; so they called it the pea drought. The elders of my village still remember the hard days.

Even when the effects of the drought subsided, they continued to give us uppittu in schools. Though the school's uppittu was rather bland, with not so much as a drop of oil or a shred of onion, I savoured it, since there was no hope of a meal at home. It would be cooked so carelessly that sometimes we found small worms in it. But since I had no choice, I would pick out the worms and eat it resignedly.

Whenever the peon at my school, Shivaramaiah, distributed the uppittu, he gave me a helping large enough to satisfy my hunger. An elderly person called Huliyappajja of the vokkaliga caste would supervise the distribution of food and make sure each child was served properly. Huliyappajja loved children; he would bring the rotis given to him at home to the holeya– madiga colony and feed the children there.

Siddaramaiah, a vokkaliga, was my classmate. His family was quite well off for those days. He had no use for the food served at school and would give me his share of the uppittu every day. I would eat my share at school and carry back Siddaramaiah's share in my bag. Everyone at home would be waiting eagerly for it. In those days, my family survived solely on the food I brought back from school. My school bag, which carried uppittu rather than slates and books, reeked with its rancid stench.

Classmates and Friends

Siddaramaiah and Mallaiah from Baruganahalli were the usual contenders for the post of class monitor. But despite distributing peppermints and pencils to his classmates, Siddaramaiah usually lost the elections. Mallaiah, who was better at schoolwork, usually won. Once, when Mallaiah refused to contest the class monitor elections, my classmates forced me to contest in his place against Siddaramaiah, my friend who gave

me his share of food every day. I was chosen unanimously. But even after I became the 'monitor', he continued to give me his uppittu and our friendship continued unhindered.

When I joined the sixth class, I became friends with two boys who'd come to my class after failing their previous year at school. One of them was from Fakirappanapalya and the other from Mallappanahalli. Both of them came from big farming households. Their fields were large and they were required to work on them every day; they had no time to study and would come to school with incomplete homework and get punished by the teachers each day. We hatched a plan to work around this situation: I would do their homework for them in return for food! The boy from Fakirappanapalya brought such delicacies as dosas, chapattis and idlis, which were unheard of in our village. The boy from Mallappanahalli, who was of the same caste as I, brought ragi rotis and sweet potatoes. As dictated by my taste buds, I was keener to do the homework of the boy from Fakirappanapalya.

They'd hand in the homework I did for them. This continued for a while. One day, the teacher got suspicious and decided to inspect their notebooks closely. His suspicion that this was not their work was proved right and he punished them severely. From then on, the boys stopped employing me for their homework and I lost out on good food.

'Just Hit Me, Uncle!'

I attended high school in Koratagere which was about six miles from my village. I walked to school and back each day. I would wake up before daybreak, sweep the cowshed, dump the cow dung in the garbage pit and cut fresh grass for the cattle before setting out for school. After all this work, I have had to go to school on an empty stomach on many occasions. Some days, I would get something like boiled leaves for breakfast. It would be past six or seven in the evenings when I returned from school. My brothers would have finished all the food in the house by then. Any leftover food would have gone stale by then anyway. I would have to stay hungry until my mother returned from work as a farmhand and cooked the usual gruel.

Once I'd returned early from school, by four o'clock. I went straight to the gruel pot. It was empty. My stomach was growling with hunger. I searched in all the pots in the house hoping to find something to eat. There was nothing. It was summer. Since the Tumbadi lake was full, people were growing groundnuts all over the place. The farm of the stone-breaker Venkatappa was close to our colony. His farm was on low-ground—no one would notice if I squatted among the crops. I went straight to the last row of plants in his field, dug up a handful of fresh groundnuts and started munching. My hunger had made me forget everything else. Since the plants were small, I managed to dig up the nuts without uprooting the plant. I must have eaten from four or five plants when I thought I heard something. I raised my head to see Venkatappa (whom I addressed as

uncle) towering over me! All my senses seemed to desert me. I stood up slowly. I thought he'd thrash me and was getting ready to wet my pants (until I was in the tenth standard, I always wet my pants when someone beat me). But Venkatappa did not beat me.

'I'll take you to Holeya Mudduhanumappa to seek justice. You think what you've done is right?' he said.

'Please, just hit me, uncle. Don't take me to him … it's very embarrassing,' I pleaded with him.

He would hear nothing of it; he grabbed me by the hand and started dragging me towards the village.

Venkatappa narrated the account of my stealing his groundnuts to Mudduhanumappa. I thought I'd die of shame. I stood with my head hung low. But Mudduhanumappa was rather fond of me. 'It's alright, Venkatappa. The poor boy has come from school. He would not have had anything to eat today … must have been hungry,' he said to Venkatappa. 'Don't do this again,' he warned me. Venkatappa let go of my hand and I dashed back home.

I was so ashamed by the whole incident that I couldn't eat my dinner even though I was very hungry. I couldn't fall asleep either. I kept tossing and turning all night.

The Breastfed Orphan

There was a man belonging to the vokkaliga caste in my village, a whiz at cards, whom I called 'uncle'. He was a married man but had a mistress in Vaddagere, a woman of the same caste. One day, he brought her back with him and kept her in his house. In due time, this woman had a child. And within three months of childbirth, she fell ill and died. The responsibility of looking after this child fell upon his wife and a hajam (barber caste) woman who worked in their house.

The wife, a large-hearted woman, came forward cheerfully to look after her husband's child from another woman. But the suckling infant was too young to be fed with anything but breast milk. This was a big concern. From where would she get breast milk for this child? At the time, there were three post-natal women in our colony, including my mother.

The hajam woman brought the baby over to our colony to be breastfed by my mother, my aunt and another lady called Nagakka. The three willingly agreed to feed this motherless child. These women, who worked as manual labourers, left home early in the mornings for work and returned only in the evenings. But every evening, they fed this child before feeding their own children. The child grew up in the midst of not one, but three, mothers.

Every evening, as if in a dream, the little child would point hungrily towards our homes. After being fed, it would stay in our homes and play until sundown. These mothers got betel nuts and betel leaves in return for this favour.

There was a belief among the people that if one gave milk to holeyas and madigas, the cows and buffaloes would yield blood from their udders rather than milk! But when inevitable, these very people did not hesitate to come to our colony and milk our cows and buffaloes for themselves. This little child, which had no caste, enriched the milk of our mothers by suckling on their breasts. Unaware of the intricacies of caste and hierarchy, it thrived happily in our mothers' laps.

The Melody of Sobane Songs

My paternal uncle had two wives—Kariamma and Nagamma. While he had married Kariamma according to custom, Nagamma was his mistress. He had met Nagamma, a married woman of our caste, on one of his tours for his business, buying and selling goats. He had an affair with her and brought her home to his wife. They all lived together in the same house. But I have never seen my two aunts fighting jealously, as one would expect of women married to the same man. My uncle had married Nagamma because his first wife, Kariamma, hadn't had children. Nagamma gave birth to seven children, one after the other. The childless Kariamma looked after Nagamma's children lovingly, as if they were her own.

These aunts of mine were known for their singing. Whether it was a wedding or a function to celebrate a young girl's coming of age, it was my aunts' sweet voices that lent music to the occasion. All they needed was someone to play the chords and enough betel leaves and betel nuts to chew on, and they would sing their sobane songs and tatwapadas (songs with moral instruction and divine sagas that are sung on such occasions) tirelessly through the night.

Besides being a singer of these folk songs, Kariamma was also the 'gynaecologist' of the area. If there was a baby to be delivered in any manegara household, or a pregnant woman needed treatment for some illness, Kariamma would be the one to attend to it. Hence, my aunt was a very busy woman. There would always be one or the other delivery or postnatal treatment to take care of. While she never had children of her own, she was perfectly content aiding other women in childbirth and childcare. All she got in return for this was betel leaves and nuts. In addition to this, she would be served some of the chicken cooked for new mothers on the third day after delivery. If her patient was very poor, she wouldn't get that either.

My uncle wasn't exactly the most responsible husband or father; he didn't bother to provide for his family. He was always away on some tour or the other. Kariamma and

Nagamma had to take on the responsibility of running the household by themselves. They worked in people's farms to make a living. On days they couldn't get work, they would grind rice and ragi in well-to-do homes in return for food; they would eat very little and bring back the rest, tied in their saris, to feed the children. The very children they strove to raise thus were unkind to them later; my aunts had put up with their beatings and curses with remarkable tolerance. Not only did my uncle not look after his wives, he also beat them often. When it got unbearable, they would team up against him and cow him down.

As if this wasn't enough, he accused them of adultery even as he lay on his deathbed. 'O Shiva! Help us, our master,' was all the shocked and saddened Nagamma and Kariamma said in return to their husband's accusation.

They picked up the ektara and took to singing the tatwapadas in submission to God after my uncle's death. To this day, come rain or shine, these wizened souls work in farms and people's homes to keep themselves fed and clothed, and sing their songs to the ektara by night. This is their chosen path.

An Opportunity to Touch God

Who built the temple at the village centre?

It was us, who are called holeya and madiga.

That very temple, why can't we enter?

'Because,' they say, 'you are holeya and madiga'![1]

This song, sung at every DSS meeting or conference, is stuck in my mind. Each time I hear it, I am reminded of all the temples in my village.

About three kilometres from our village, there was an old Hanuman temple in a small wooded area near the ruins of the old village; these were the ruins of the houses abandoned during a plague epidemic not too long ago. This temple was in ruins itself. When we took our cattle out grazing there, we sought shelter from the rain in those ruins. Even though this temple was in a state of disuse, we were afraid to enter its sanctum sanctorum.

Then there was an older temple built by the Cholas to the west of the village. It is still called the Chola temple. Though we walked close to this temple while grazing our cattle, we dared not enter it either. Our elders told us that there were seven pots of money buried inside it and that there was a seven-headed snake guarding it; if anyone tried breaking into it, this snake would bite him and he would vomit blood and die. This scared us for sure. But I don't remember anyone in my village dying in this manner.

While these were the temples on the outskirts, there was a main Hanuman temple in the centre of the village; we called it the big temple. It was in a bad state too. The people of the village decided to pull it down and build a new one in its place. Doddanna, a building contractor from our village, was assigned the job of building the new temple. I was studying for my PUC at Koratagere then. Since it was vacation time, I had sought employment from Doddanna in the construction work.

Construction had to begin from within, with the restoration of the sanctorum. I was given the job of pulling out the stones from the old structure. Since it was a one-man job, I was working on it alone. I was prying out the stones slowly, one by one. When there was a gap in the wall, I could see the idol of Hanuman inside. It was dressed in wads of straw to prevent it from cracking in the heat during the restoration. I pulled aside the straw and touched the idol and prayed to it. Since I was the only one working there at that time, I wasn't afraid of being seen. I touched the idol to my heart's content and pressed my hands to my eyes, worshipfully. I had never had the chance to touch the idol in the past. And I knew that once the temple was ready, I would never ever get to touch it again.

The Principal Hugged Me

For six years—from the time I joined the high school in Koratagere, until my PUC—I walked to school and back to my village every day. What I am describing took place at a time when I had only three months left to complete the first year of my PUC. There was a certain person in Koratagere who had a rather conspicuous style. Dressed in soiled khadi, clutching a diary and a three-day-old newspaper, he would be seen walking around with a purposeful gait. Some of us had the (mis)fortune of becoming the target of this do-gooder. He said he was in the process of starting a hostel for SC and ST students studying for their PUC in Koratagere and promised us all sorts of facilities from the government. We were tired of walking long distances every day and readily agreed. There were ten SC/ ST students in my college, including me. There was an old canteen for government servants lying empty on Madhugiri road. No sooner had Our Helpful Friend caught sight of this building than he had a board that read *Sudnyana Vidya Sansthe* slung on it overnight, converting it to an SC/ST hostel. This hostel was readied in a hurry to accommodate us for the remaining three months of our first year of PUC. This man became the warden and the secretary to our hostel. That was the beginning of our struggles.

N. Rachaiah, the then minister for social welfare, was invited for its inaugural function. Our patron jumped at this opportunity and bestowed upon the minister the title of the Man Lion of Harijans and accepted the title of Lion Cub from him in return!

Since there wasn't much time left, we made the most of the two meals provided to us in the hostel and studied the best we could to pass our examinations. When we entered the second year of PUC, we were expecting to go on living in the hostel as in the last three months of the previous year. But people in the block office created a ruckus and had us vacate the building. The hostel was restarted in an old guest house behind the canteen. This building had only a tiny kitchen and a small room. It was too cramped for the ten of us to sleep in. So they arranged a rented room for us near the government hospital. This meant eating in one place and sleeping in another.

After this, the condition of the hostel started deteriorating. They began rationing our food. When we approached the cook, he said, 'What can I do? I am merely following the warden's instructions.' Our patron had decided that his job description consisted only of making frequent trips to Tumkur and Bangalore. Hence we had no one to address our problems. The worst thing of all was that our principal, known for his sincerity and integrity, failed to notice the injustice being done to us.

Siddharamesh, a boy who'd failed in PUC once, tried convincing us that we should protest this injustice. We village boys were intimidated by city folks and were initially reluctant about protesting. Somehow we mustered enough courage and decided that this was the only way out. Six out of the ten of us were not too concerned about the whole issue; they didn't care less if the hostel were to be closed or their studies stopped. Of the remaining four, two were either too shy or too scared to have an opinion of their own. So it fell upon my friend, Ramachandra, and me to visit the principal's office twice a day to quarrel over the hostel situation. We were surprised to see that our principal, who normally had a sense of humour and never discriminated on the lines of caste or religion, went mum when we went to him with our concerns. While we regretted this conflict with one of our favourite teachers, we also had the satisfaction of knowing that we were fighting injustice.

Soon they stopped serving us food at the hostel altogether. In addition to this, they had taken our signatures on the receipts for all the money we were entitled to in the whole year and then flatly refused to have anything to do with us. We were left with no option but to go to war for our rights. We approached the social welfare officer of the block with our complaint, to no avail. The next day, the four of us spread a couple of mats under the big banyan tree before the college and sat there in protest (the remaining six, who seemed to be worried about being identified as dalits if seen with us, or that the girls would think less of them, looked at us from a distance and went away). No one bothered to address us that day. Unwilling to accept defeat, we went back to sit in protest again the next day. The hostel authorities tried threatening us with the help of some policemen belonging to our own caste. They also got a retired revenue officer of

our caste to try reasoning with us. We wouldn't budge. 'Give us the money we are entitled to, or return it to the government,' was our unyielding demand.

When they realized how firm we were on this, the principal called us for a meeting. The meeting was mediated by one of our most respected teachers, M. Krishna Rao. After the meeting, we tore up the receipt for the money we had signed earlier. From then on, my association with the hostel ended.

I started walking to college and back every day, like before. I ate with some friends in the afternoon and stayed overnight to study with some others who happened to have electricity in their rooms. With the help of these kind friends, I managed to prepare for my examinations. But just when the exams were to begin, I had a bad bout of migraine. It would get worse if I tried reading. I wouldn't see a doctor as I was scared of hospitals. I didn't know how I would revise my lessons in this condition. Just then, I remembered that my classmate, a lambada boy, had the habit of reading his lessons out loud every day under the big tree near the college. I would lie down with my eyes shut, close to where he sat reading, and listen to him. I wrote my exam based on what I'd heard.

A lot of people were expecting us to fail our exams since we were involved in strikes and protests the entire year. We proved them all wrong; among the four of us, three passed with a first class.

I was going to join the college in Tumkur for my BA. I went to the principal's office to get the transfer certificate and marks card. The principal appeared angry. 'You cursed me all these days. I shall write "Bad Character" on your TC!' he bellowed. 'Mr Iliyas, state that his character is bad,' he instructed the English teacher who was writing the TCs. All my strength seemed to drain away. I'd worked so hard to pass; is this what I deserved in return? I stood there feeling helpless. Then I saw Mr Iliyas smiling to himself. That gave me some courage. 'Ramaiah, come here,' said the principal. I stepped forward fearfully. He drew me into a bear hug! I was pleasantly surprised. 'I don't care if you've cursed me in the past; I am fond of you all the same. Continue to study hard. You'll certainly make it big,' he said, handing me the TC.

DSS Zindabad

It was the year 1983. Ramakrishna Hegde was the chief minister of Karnataka then. Atrocities against dalits in the state had soared sky-high. DSS had decided to protest against these by picketing before the houses of all the ministers of the state. DSS did not have an official branch in Tumkur district then; a five-member ad hoc committee conducted its activities there. I was one of them. Since Tumkur was close to Bangalore, the state office of the organization had instructed us to bring a large number of volunteers for the rally. A meeting was organized in connection with this at the dalit

hostel on Mahatma Gandhi Road. There was a heated discussion among the senior activists over the idea of travelling ticketless in trains for the rally. While some argued that it was wrong to travel without tickets, others claimed that it was the right of dalits to do so. There was a downpour of all sorts of 'logical reasoning'; Gandhi and Ambedkar were quoted extensively. Finally, it was decided that we would travel without tickets to Bangalore. We boarded the train shouting slogans: 'Ambedkar Zindabad!', 'DSS Zindabad!'

Two of our members who'd argued against ticketless travelling had excused themselves from coming to the picketing programme on the pretext of poor health. But one of the people who had argued for it as the right of the dalits produced a ticket from his pocket midway. If we all get arrested for not having tickets, we'd need someone to get us out; he claimed that this is the reason he'd bought the ticket! Unaware of such double-dealing leaders, hundreds of DSS activists kept up the 'DSS Zindabad' with fervour.

We spent the night before the day of the picketing in the dalit colony of Yashwantpura. Thousands of activists had come from faraway places like Raichur, Gulbarga and Bijapur. We slept wherever we could, on doorsteps of shops, on the roads; the sky was our blanket and the earth our bed. The women and children of the colony got together and made us chapattis on makeshift stoves. The next morning, we ate what we could and packed the rest of the chapattis and set out to start picketing at ministers' homes. The volunteers from Tumkur were assigned to picket Chief Minister Hegde's home under the leadership of B. Krishnappa. When we were still about a hundred yards from the chief minister's home, we were stopped by the police. The CM had supposedly left by the back door for an Assembly meeting at the Vidhana Soudha. Our leaders demanded that the chief minister be called back to address us—if not, we would enter his house by force to make our protest, they warned the police.

An activist got into a quarrel with one of the police inspectors and the policeman picked up his cane to beat us all. Our leader Krishnappa rushed to the spot and managed to ease the situation. He picked up a chapatti from the bag of one of the activists and held it up for the policemen to see, 'Friends, you are all working here for this piece of bread. Our fight is to demand a piece of bread for the hungry millions of this country. If you have any humanity in you, please cooperate with us. Please do not stand in the way of our fight for the poor,' he said in a moving speech. A policeman of the grade of ACP, who'd witnessed this scene, sent away the cane-wielding inspector and replaced him with another. The whole atmosphere relaxed after this.

The police arrested us. We got into their vans shouting our slogans. They took us to the Jalahalli police station. They got us food from the restaurants. The local DSS activists kept a tab on the different police stations where activists from various places

were held. All the police lockups in the city were overflowing with our activists. We were released in the evening. The inspector of the Jalahalli station was very friendly and respectful towards us. He shook hands with us and bid us farewell.

Pearly Millet: Excerpts

Translated by Maithreyi K.R.

KB's Wedding

It was a time when the DSS's activities were at their peak in Tumkur district. We always participated in all its programmes enthusiastically. What was funny, however, was how everyone shied away from being appointed an office-bearer. There wasn't much competition in those days. People who seemed reluctant in the beginning, once they were drawn by the force of the organization, continued working selflessly for it all their lives. An example of this is Purada Chandranna of Bangalore. He had studied for his MA in Bangalore and moved to Tumkur soon after. He seemed to be dismissive of the Samiti initially. But gradually he became completely immersed in the activities and the ideology of the Samiti.

K.B. Siddaiah (known simply as KB/Kaybee), who was well known in the state, was already a hero among the DSS activists of Tumkur, even before he came to us from Mysore. He had completed his MA in Mysore and come to Tumkur to work as an English lecturer. He was also simultaneously studying for his LLB. There were rumours galore about his eminence and authority (that he was known to Chief Minister Devaraj Urs; that he'd reprimanded the VC of Mysore University on a certain occasion, and so on). Moreover, whenever he attended an LLB class, the lecturers addressed him respectfully.

His was a complex personality. While he did not hesitate to challenge anyone about something he believed in, he had the knack of winning people over with his affability. He was a great orator and could speak to large gatherings seriously and humorously with equal ease. He spoke English—which we found a tough nut to crack—with effortless fluency and confidence.[2]

KB's simple wedding can be regarded as a landmark in the history of the DSS. It was the subject of discussion for a whole year before the actual event took place. 'I shall marry Gangarajamma, come what may,' he would say. Timmaiah of Kundoor had taken on the responsibility of arranging the wedding of KB and Gangarajamma. It was

decided that it would be conducted in Kundoor. This marriage was supported by all the DSS activists of the entire Tumkur district!

Meanwhile, the families of two dalit brothers of Karegondanahalli village in Gubbi taluk had fought each other and were arrested by the police. The DSS had delegated K.P. Narasimharaju, Rangaiah and me to resolve this issue. We decided to head to Karegondanahalli on the day before KB's wedding, settle the fight by night and make it to the wedding the next morning. We stopped at Gubbi on the way to Karegondanahalli to check on the casualties from both sides admitted at the hospital there. We also went to the police station and enquired into the reasons for the scuffle between the families. We then travelled from Gubbi to Nittoor by train and walked the three kilometres to Karegondanahalli from there.

By the time we reached the village, it was getting dark. We didn't go to the homes of the feuding families directly. Instead, we met with the other dalit families in the village and discussed the issue with them. We discovered that all the dalit families in that village belonged to the 'left-hand' group [madiga]. They were all closely related to each other by blood or by marriage. What surprised us was that no one in these families was addicted to drink. And other than the two families in question, the rest made their living as manual labourers. Only these two families had people employed in government service. They also owned some cultivated land and were therefore economically better off than the other dalit households. We learnt from the villagers that, owing to their wealth, these families were always jealously quarrelling with each other and wasting their time and money on cops and courts.

After dinner, we sat down to hear the case. Since both the parties kept arguing obstinately, we couldn't reach a decision all night. Curiously, both these families were staunch supporters of the DSS, which is why we'd decided to intervene in the first place. Narasimharaju exercised every ounce of his knowledge and learning in attempting a truce between them. Nothing seemed to work. In utter frustration, we decided to call it a day and went to sleep in somebody's shack.

The guests of honour at the wedding function, B. Krishnappa and Lingadevaru Halemane, were already present at the venue when we reached. The atmosphere in the village was tense because of this wedding. The bride's parents had vowed not to let the wedding take place. They would not hear of their daughter marrying a madiga. There were rumours that they had hired goons from Jaypur in Tumkur to disrupt the event. To counter these goons, Timmaiah's men were said to be on the prowl. But in reality, we found no trace of any goons whatsoever!

The mood in the groom's camp was no different. 'The whole village reveres me. The holeya of my village do not so much as dare to speak up before me. How can I allow my

son to marry a holeya woman?' retorted the groom's father and had refused to come to the wedding. He also did not allow KB's mother to attend it.

B. Krishnappa decided to call a meeting to resolve the situation. He invited Gangarajamma's parents and relatives for a dialogue and informed them that her decision would be final and binding. Addressing them, he said, 'Friends, K.B. Siddaiah and Gangarajamma have decided to marry each other. This is their personal choice. Let's all respect this. The bride's family is against this union. I feel that they should not get in the way of the love of these two people. Let the decision be completely Gangarajamma's. Let her choose between the man she loves and the parents who raised her.' Turning to her, he said, 'Don't be afraid, child. Tell us which you want of the two,' he said. Gangarajamma stood up and said, 'I want my KB.' Her speech was firm. This instilled confidence in KB, who broke down and wept like a child under the stress. Gangarajamma wasn't done with her speech yet, but her disappointed parents and relatives had begun to cry loudly. They disregarded Krishnappa's 'bless the new couple' and walked out dejected.

Because of this, the wedding ceremony started late. KB married Gangarajamma by tying the thali around her neck. This was followed by the staging of the play *Sheshagiriyappana Kaggole* [Sheshagiriyappa's Murder] by DSS activists. The role of Krishnegowda's younger brother, Venkatesh, was played by Rangaiah. In the scene where Sheshagiri's character flings down the dalit character, Murthy, he got carried away and threw Murthy on the thorny fence. Poor Murthy, though pricked all over by the thorns, stood up smiling sheepishly. The success of KB's wedding had spread joy in the DSS family. Timmaiah had arranged a grand feast. After lunch, we boarded the train to Tumkur, singing songs of revolution.

The newlyweds were received in Tumkur by our beloved English professor H.S. Shivaprakash. He offered them good dinner at a restaurant and saw them off. In due time, Gangarajamma's parents cooled down and accepted her marriage. They began visiting the couple at their Upparahalli home in Tumkur.

Hatti Lakkamma and Manegara

In 1981, the rationing department had started a scheme to distribute new ration cards in Tumkur. I was in a stipendiary job in the department at the time, and was one of the thirteen people assigned the job of distributing ration cards in the whole town. Most of the people on this team, including me, were dalits. Sanjeevappa, Javarappa, Ajjigonahalli Rangaiah and our manager were all dalits. Also, one of the two food inspectors working with us was a dalit. There were five women in our team; three of them were brahmins, one was a Muslim and one lingayat. The brahmin women lived in

Chikkapete of Tumkur; Shantamma, the lingayat, lived in Someshwar Extension; and the Muslim lady, Shamshad, lived in Krishnarajendra Extension.

These women were friendly and cordial with us. The only brahmin man in our team did not like this. 'They are madiga. Why do you mix with them?' he would say to the women in our absence. The women didn't like his comment and told us about it. The most reticent of the lot, Indira, had come out in our support. 'Look at Sanjeevappa and Ramaiah. They are so amiable and decent. Why can't everyone be like them!' she'd said to this man. Shamshad fondly called me lamboo dada and I always addressed her as 'sister'.

Meanwhile, I had to vacate my rented room in Someshwar Extension for some unexpected reason. I tried looking for a room elsewhere but all the places demanded large amounts of deposit money. I couldn't afford that. I spoke of my rooming situation to my colleagues one day. To this, Shantamma said reassuringly, 'Ramaiah, there is a vacant room on the upper floor of our house. My mother rents it out. I'll check with her about letting you have it and tell you tomorrow.'

'My mother has agreed to rent you the room. But you may not find it perfectly agreeable. She is old-fashioned in her thinking; she insists that you cannot have too many guests and that you should turn the lights off at ten o'clock every night,' she told me, the next day. Moreover, there was a long list of specifications on the kinds of people I could invite to my room. I could put up with these restrictions somehow, but my only worry was about having to disclose my caste. I expressed this openly to Shantamma. She agreed that my caste might be an issue with her mother. 'Let's not discuss it with her; I have no problem with your caste,' she said. Encouraged by this, I rented this room along with some four or five other boys.

Since I had many friends in Tumkur, the number of visitors to my room increased gradually. Shantamma's mother would get irritated, but Shantamma would pacify her tactfully. Shantamma's mother had a loud voice; it could be heard as far away as the big tree on the main road. The neighbours were rather fearful of her voice and avoided her. Even her only son, unable to handle her quarrelsome nature, stayed away in the village and commuted to work in Tumkur every day. She stringently collected the rent for the three or four houses they owned in Tumkur.

One day, my friends had brought along a shoemaker to repair their torn chappals to our room. This man sat in the roomy gallery in front of our room and started stitching the badly worn chappals, not very skilfully. This reminded me of my father. I have accompanied my father on several occasions when he repaired chappals just like this. I did little chores for him on those occasions. My father was a proud man; he never sought favours from anybody even in extreme poverty. The image of his smiling personality, facing each difficulty bravely, rose before my eyes.

The sound of the shoemaker pounding on the leather echoed loudly. Hearing this, Shantamma's mother saw red. She ascended the stairs swiftly and gave a verbal lashing to my friends. She chased away the shoemaker with her razor-sharp tongue. Once he left, she addressed us, 'I have the altar of our goddess Hatti Lakkamma right below the place that filthy shoemaker was sitting. Our Hatti Lakkamma cannot stand these manegara! How dare you bring him into this house? You think Hatti Lakkamma will let you get away with this?' She went downstairs mumbling angrily to herself. I found her speech extremely weird. We manegara had nothing to do with this Hatti Lakkamma in the first place. Even the gods must have a grudge against us, just like Shantamma's mother, I said to myself and laughed silently. My friends, were on the one hand scared that they'd be made to vacate the room, but on the other, wanted to laugh; we were all manegara ourselves!

As if this wasn't enough, there was another occasion where I came close to being 'discovered'. One day, the sister of my friend Hanumantharaya—who worked in the HMT factory—and her husband Rangappa came to Tumkur looking for me. They had somehow managed to discover my address. When they got here, they met Shantamma's mother. Taking her to be a village woman, 'Ramaiah of our Tumbadi Gollahalli village lives here. Is he home?' they'd asked her. 'No one of that description lives here,' she'd replied. 'Grandmother, we are talking about Ramaiah of our manegara caste. We are related to him,' they'd insisted. 'No one of that caste dares come here,' she'd replied and sent them packing. She'd grown a little suspicious after this and confronted her daughter with, 'The boy who rents our room, is he a madiga?' as soon as she came home from work. Shantamma had brushed aside the question.

A short while after these incidents, we left the room for some other reason. We narrowly escaped having a face-to-face confrontation with Shantamma's mother over the issue of our caste. We also barely escaped the wrath of Hatti Lakkamma.

Kotiganahalli Ramaiah

‘What is colour? Today my search for the answer takes me on a journey in which I learn from children and the common people around here about the history of colour and its contemporary meaning. We can also ask that question about history itself, about the basis of justice, or the nature of society; about caste too. This is living knowledge. The only way to understand caste is to be steeped in people’s life, not through any given idea of caste … I am not a much-read person. I studied only up to PUC. DSS was my first real school—and now I am in search of another one and have some small ideas of how we can go beyond the derivative knowledge that we are mired in today.’ This is what Kotiganahalli Ramaiah tells us, sitting under the shade of a huge rock in ADIMA, the cultural centre he and others are developing in the spectacular boulder-filled landscape of Shatashrunga Konda near Kolar.

Born in 1955 in Kottiganahalli, Hassan district, Ramaiah studied until PUC before he left in the in the mid-1970s for a small job in the Railway Mail Services as a sorter, moving on a couple of years later to clerk-cum-cashier at Canara Bank. The focus of his interest, however, was the burgeoning DSS movement. He shifted to journalism and over the next two decades, worked with every important Dalit–Bandaya journal. In 1983, Ramaiah joined *Lankesh Patrike* as a reporter, moving in 1984 to *Mungaru*, where among other things, he had charge of the weekly magazine section. Between 1985 and 1990, he worked in *Suddi Sangathi* as chief reporter before he became editor of *Panchama*, the fortnightly dalit cultural journal. Over the next three decades, he developed a dozen street plays and plays for children, most of them about the wisdom of ‘instinctive existence’ and the survival knowledge of ordinary people. Ramaiah also wrote award-winning scripts and dialogues for feature films, documentaries, educational films and films associated with government programmes (power, SC/ST, education, health).

‘I don’t define the term “dalit” as the Panthers did, or even as the DSS did. In the 1970s, the Ambedkarites used the term to bring all suppressed masses under that umbrella. Today I do not find much meaning in that,’ he says. ‘In fact, now dalit or OBC have become terms in the government’s developmental vocabulary. They are sunk in that vocabulary and unable to touch real people’s suffering or knowledge. That is also the reason why I write poems—not what is spoken of as poetry. I have a poem about Basava. The central metaphor is that of two snakes intertwined, and the poem is a

critique of the use of Basava by the lingayats. Basava's Kudala Sangama [pilgrimage] represents the history that Kannadigas are most proud of. But what has that history become today? The lingayats, who are the biggest and most oppressive caste in Karnataka, have put together 200 crore rupees to rebuild this Kudala Sangama, which now features an underwater lingam. Every lingayat dreams of making a pilgrimage to this place where the waters meet. This linga is a symbol of their unity. And alongside all this in north Karnataka is the practice of taking untouchable girls and using them as temple dasis. These children are picked up when they are nine or ten, bought by the village head, enslaved. What chance do they have to develop as persons, as human beings? No administrator, no feminist is interested in this. We should ask, what is this history? Who is this Basava? What has he been made into? Why has this scholar and thinker been put on a horse with a sword in his hand, why has he been turned into a violent kshatriya?' Ramaiah adds, 'Even as the lingayats unite, the dalits are breaking apart. Today, there are about thirty dalit organizations in Karnataka. It could have been different.'

Ramaiah explains the current predicament of the DSS with an account of the 1991 DSS-organized Jana Kalamela, in which dalits from all over the state brought their musical and craft instruments, productive practices, modes of dressing and symbols of various kinds. Sixty to seventy thousand people came to a huge meeting in Cubbon Park, in the centre of Bangalore. 'The idea was that we needed to identify with our cultural history, draw on the strength of our cultural identity and use this knowledge and experience as the base for political thinking. Dalits who came from different parts of the state were thrilled by the idea. Unfortunately, people with vested political interests saw the strength of the dalits, and there was a scramble to take over that might. Ram Vilas Paswan played a key role in all this. He wanted us to run for elections. I opposed the idea—in fact, I was the only one to oppose it strongly. Even Devanoora was silent. Finally, after much bargaining, the DSS got two seats. We were to contest under the Socialist Party symbol. B. Krishnappa stood from Kolar on a Janata Party ticket—and lost. This move into mainstream politics led to the first big split in the DSS. Since then it has been a steady decline. The DSS now comprises petit bourgeois officials. The DSS school closed for me. I began searching elsewhere.'

In Ramaiah's account, this is where ADIMA makes its appearance. 'I knew that I did not want to be a political activist, I wanted to be a cultural activist. Today, culture at all levels is in the hands of the big people; it is a shield to keep their existence intact. But what about our existence, and the culture that enables its survival?' A group of about thirty people decided to put aside a rupee a day for this work. One of the last meetings that took place before the organization was launched took place on a boulder-strewn hill. There was a small, broken-down shrine and a tree. 'We felt the place was saying

something to us. Who planted this tree, we asked. “Jinke Ramaiah,” we were told. He used to grow flowers here—we have never seen so many different kinds.’

He remembers the time when they started a children’s theatre camp in these hills. ‘Children came from the nearby villages; nowadays many come from elsewhere too. Prasanna inaugurated the eight-day festival with which ADIMA began.’

Ramaiah is working around what he terms ‘survival texts’. Survival texts developed through a sort of integrated community learning. ‘Ragi is a survival text, so is bamboo, so are memories that keep these communities connected. Sometimes I feel we are giving children the resources with which to retain a memory that is erased by “regular” schooling.’ Working with groups of children, the ADIMA team has now developed around twenty survival texts. ‘I see these as tools with which we can fight the erosion that globalization brings to our worlds. Many people outside see hope in such work.’ In fact, Ramaiah’s ideas and his work are a major inspiration for efforts such as those of the Bayalu team of young, mostly dalit, teachers asking the question: what makes our classrooms different from those taught by upper-caste teachers?

The three poems translated here were all written in 2010.

Mahanagari Footpath

Translated by Tejaswini Niranjana

Walking along on the footpaths
created by a great civilization in this great city
now and then you must glance down at where your feet are treading,
if possible you must watch every step
see if through the cracks you can glimpse the sewer below:
shit, piss, semen, spittle
nail and hair, of high and low
history’s cauldron.
Under today’s feet the fire rages higher.
From Mohenjo-Daro to Babar,
a foetus torn from the mother’s womb,
a piece of meat from the village feast,

a piece of burnt brick,
these could be used for anything,
depending on one's religion.
No
here in the measure of a glance,
the stone at the end of a slingshot,
in the brave earth that has attracted a cobra
little children eat handfuls of mud to quench their hunger.
A flute, a broken word,
or
the great vulture from the depths of the earth
spreading its wings across the sky
and hurtling across borders.
The piece of a young Jew's broken skull,
the lakhs of Vietnamese children burnt by Yankee Big Brother's napalm
bombs
and their Ekalavya thumbs—as though exercising all in a row.
No
here, on the island in the middle of the ocean,
wanting a new day to dawn,
for the sun [Prabhakara] to dawn
all those Krishna-complexioned youth
the cyanide pills from around their necks
perhaps some of that is in the sewers too.
Or it might have stuck to a handful of grain rushing past,
tossed by the flowing filth
It's always like that.
Only sometimes do the sewers flood in rage
Mostly they flow quietly
As though nothing has ever happened
Pure, transparent

Like the glaze on granite.
That's why it's always best to look down at the stones while walking.
You might see if you look carefully
the rangoli drawn by a housewife who has no courtyard to display it
a handful of cheap ration-shop rice grains
spilt by a boy playing hookey from school
And smoking a stolen cigarette;
the lines of ants, filled with hunger or filled with dreams
the lipstick laid on thickly for a customer
now fading into the shadows of truth
or
the faded colour dust from the masks of
ancestors whose game is over
or
the rosebud plucked in stealth from her employer's garden
fallen from the braid of a young servant.
If you are lucky you will see something like this:
a shred from the ironed uniform of Saddam, unshaken even by the
noose;
you will see something like this if you walk watching every step you take
on the footpaths of the great city.
Fortunate indeed are those who walk on the mahanagari footpath,
most fortunate.

The Story Footwear Tell

Translated by Tejaswini Niranjana

Here the ocean's edge, here Dandi
here Dandakaranya, dense forest

here the hoof-sound of ashwamedha horses,
swords and muskets, gunpowder and bullet,
China's Long March,
Chalo Kashi and Rameshwar, Ayodhya and the rath yatra.
When we speak of the grand and the terrifying
long journeys
we need to also speak about footwear.
Because there are no journeys without feet
and no pilgrimages, no funeral processions either;
at the beginning of all long journeys there are feet;
Ashwini, Bhadrapada, Revati, Swati,
no stars or rains without accompanying feet.

There's no strict rule that feet should always be on the move.
Maybe they will move on or they will not.
Maybe they will move forward or backward.
History is generous and will not fault them,
even when feet are unmoving.
Where there are feet there should be a
paaduka pattabhisheka.
The slippers given to Basavanna by Maadara Chennayya
to ascend Manteswamy's burning throne,
the throne to prove honesty;
the raft built by Boatman Chowdayya
that sank without reaching the shore;
skin that rotted away from the bones
and fed frogs and small fish.
The ox that goes round and round pulling the oil press
no puja for its feet, no adoration
no holiday for the ox, only endless circling.
History's corpses, ashes, graveyard,
here the dead do not come walking on their feet

and no rule that says everyone with feet should walk.
Feet and journeys are bound to each other
Whether they like it or not.
The more blood you drink the more you crave.
Towns and villages like graveyards
fattened bulls for the goddess sacrifice.
The first blow of the machete falls on the knees.
This is why some feet do not wander here;
those coins with feet imprinted on them don't circulate here;
but there have always been feet destined for puja—what about them?
They come walking along to the dalitwada
whenever history's conscience pricks them;
for worship or thrill or the radiant chanting of mantras
for Maadara Chennayya's splendid leather slippers.
Finally a time when feet can be worshipped
without journeys, without history's long journeys.
Say 'Govinda' to these feet,
surrender to Sri Maadara Chennayya's feet clad in leather slippers.

Poetry Like Relationships Must Not Lose Direction

Translated by Tejaswini Niranjana

Can't even write a poem in this listless state.
Maybe even the words have this fault, or don't meet the listeners'
expectations.
I know I shouldn't write with things unresolved, that it's pointless
but I can't not write, and therefore I keep writing.
Knowing it's no use but not knowing what else to do
hoping that the poem will show direction

where there is none.
But now I'm losing that belief too.
Face drained, pressed to floor or wall
the might of many feet pressing on my back
I am a boar in the plain of dreams
shrieking full-throated.
They hold aloft spear, sword, knife, dagger
a vessel to catch the pouring blood …
Now I know from experience
that poems cannot show direction.
If you think a poem is a relationship
relationships too bear the same elucidation.
They too show direction
but can lose direction as they approach the sacrificial altar.
Neither poem nor relationship must lose direction
nor must either make one lose direction.
Apart from these what else can be there in word, poem, relationship …
As the day dawns, as the poem dawns
the ink in the poem-writing pen has dried up,
or maybe it's still there—the relationship's feeling ebbing away,
only those who have felt it know the irritation …
This hara-kiri …
both poem and relationship can kill you by inciting suicide;
both poem and relationship can be steps to self-murder
or a cradle for new birth.
Depends on how you feel about it, on the fruits of your legacy.
Like me, my poem too shares the same fate
it must die or it must live
it must try not to kill itself
waiting for someone to take it up into their heart's cradle
and sing a lullaby.

Aravind Malagatti

Aravind Malagatti's elder brother Ramasamy once wrote to his family asking for some money urgently. Young Malagatti was sent to Dharwad to hand the money over to Ramasamy in his hostel room. When he arrived, he found Ramasamy and his friends rehearsing a street play, *Belchi*, based on an actual incident that had taken place in Bihar in 1978 in which dalits were massacred. They pulled Malagatti into the performance when they saw him and it soon became clear to him that his brother had asked for the money to take the play to a festival conducted by the Samudaya group. 'This experience was a formative one for me,' Malagatti told us when we met him in his airy professor's room in the university. In fact, Ramasamy, whom he much admires, was a shaping influence in many ways. 'I would stealthily observe his ways and his activities; I copied his responses, watched him and read what he read; I absorbed quite a bit of his personality,' he acknowledges. Today, Aravind Malagatti is a prominent writer, critic, researcher and academic administrator.

Malagatti was born in 1956 in Muddebhihal, a small town in Bijapur district. His father, Yallappa, was a teacher and mother, Basavva, a homemaker. He had two elder brothers, Ramasamy and Basavaraju. Yallappa passed away when Malagatti was ten months old, and it was the father's younger brother who supported the family. Malagatti's grandfather, Ayyappa, who had worked as a bailiff in the travelling courts held by the British, was the first educated person in the area. The autobiographical piece translated here describes Ayyappa's experiences.

Initially, Malagatti did not seem academically inclined. On most days, he would leave home, hang around outside the temple and return at the end of the school day. Not surprisingly, he failed his PUC examination. A girl in his class commented, 'You are having a good time now, but you will suffer tomorrow.' That hurt him greatly. He also realized that he would have to remain in the same class, a humiliation that spurred him on to study seriously. He tells us that it wasn't easy. 'I used to read till late in the night under the street light. A group of prostitutes lived in a block beside our colony. The customers who visited these prostitutes found the street light a problem and they used to break the bulb to keep the area dark. My complaints did not work. I had to read using a small oil lamp.' Seeing this, Malagatti's uncle bought him a lantern. When the examinations drew close, he would pack some food and go to the Padmavati hillock to study during the day.

Two people from his colony, Ardhata Basappa and Kumba Gundappa, were experts in the classical form of oral poetic composition. Their response even to a simple question would involve an elaborate play of words. Impressed by their skill, Malagatti began experimenting with writing songs himself. Another important influence was his mother, acknowledged as an accomplished singer in the village, who also composed songs in the local folk style. In college, Malagatti was active in the arts and was a popular singer and actor. He would often be asked to set Bendre's poems to music and sing them. He composed many songs based on Bendre's and Kuvempu's poems this way —composing a new song with the opening lines (pallavi) of the poem. He would also compose songs in the local musical modes on issues of everyday life in his village. In addition, he wrote some plays himself and acted in a college play, *Kuruburalakka: Elizabeth Rani*. All this experience helped Malagatti sharpen his literary skills.

Aravind Malagatti's brother, Ramasamy, who was studying for a masters degree in social work, was an active member of the Samudaya group working in the area. He organized an Ambedkar Association in the village. Once he invited two professors to attend the celebrations that they were organizing to mark Ambedkar's birthday. The two women, friends of Ramasamy (one gowda and the other patil), came to the colony to attend the function. 'They seemed like goddesses descending on earth; no upper-caste person had visited our house before,' Malagatti says. Ramasamy wrote a poem about one of these girls. Malagatti secretly read his brother's poetry and started looking for poetry collections in the library. 'Once I asked my brother to explain the poem "Shuggie" to me just before the examinations. He refused to help. But after the exam was over, he explained it. I was fascinated by this poem, which is about the rhythms of agriculture and harvesting,' Malagatti says. Ramasamy took up a campaign to educate a group of prostitutes and their children. 'When the response was poor, he started a bhajana mandali and composed bhajans to propagate his message, and that met with immediate success,' Malagatti remembers, smiling.

Malagatti moved to Dharwad in 1978 to study for his MA in Karnatak University. He completed his Ph.D in 1985 from the same university and won a gold medal for his thesis. He says, 'DSS was an important association and it was very strong in Dharwad in those days. Rayanna was one of its main leaders at that time.' Malagatti had started writing poems and showed them to Rayanna, who encouraged him to publish them. His first collection of poems, *Mookanige Baayi Bandaaga* (When the Mute Started Speaking), was published in 1982. One of his teachers was unhappy about two poems in the collection. In one, the problem was his use of a familiar mode of address to ask the goddess Saraswati to dance on the poet's tongue. The other reservation was regarding a poem about splashing colour on dalit women during Holi. The poet questions this and asks why upper-caste women are not splashed with colour in the same way in public

spaces. The teacher was offended by the poet's treatment of Saraswati as an ordinary woman and his criticism of the upper-caste bias in Holi celebrations.

Malagatti joined the Government College, Mangalore, as a lecturer in 1983. He worked closely with the DSS in Mangalore. Among their many initiatives, he picks out for mention the Kudremukh incident where a 'swamiji' raped and tortured a dalit woman. The DSS organized protests and wrote and performed a street play in the campaign they conducted around the incident. Sometime later, the then Union minister, Janardhana Pujari, made a statement saying that Ambedkar did not write the Constitution of India by himself. This led to another big controversy. There was a huge protest demonstration against the minister. Pujari was most probably responding to dalit criticism of, and their rejection of, Gandhi. Malagatti was involved in this protest. He now works with all dalit organizations—the DSS, Samata Sanghatana, BSP and others. The splits in the DSS, he feels, are a natural phenomenon and terms them 'brotherly disputes'. He rejects the view that there is no dalit movement and no significant activity any more.

Aravind Malagatti is currently professor at the Kuvempu Institute of Kannada Studies, Mysore University, Mysore. He has published nine collections of poetry—among them *Kappu Kavya* (Black Poetry, 1985), *Mooraneya Kannu* (The Third Eye, 1996), *Chandaal Swargaarohanam* (The Untouchable Ascends to Heaven, 2003) and *Huvu Balubhara* (The Weight of Flowers, 2010)—a collection of stories, a novel, two plays and five books on literary and social criticism. His autobiography *Government Brahmana,* which was also translated into English in 1994, has been extremely well received. He has several research publications on folklore and on dalit social and cultural thought. Among his many honours and awards are the Narasimhaiah Award 1996, the Dr Ambedkar Fellowship Award 1996, the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award 1996 (for his autobiography *Government Brahmana*), the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Fellowship Award 2002 (for his overall contribution to Kannada literature) and the Government of Karnataka Ambedkar Award 2005.

We have translated excerpts from the forthcoming second volume of his autobiography and a paper presented at a seminar on Dr Ambedkar's philosophical writings organized by the Department of Kannada, Mangalore University, 1991. For a discussion on the literary movements that he refers to in the essay, see Introduction.

My Grandfather's Turban and Sceptre

Translated by Pranava Manjari

'Malagatti' is the name of a small village located in Surapura taluk of Gulbarga district in Karnataka. My forefathers lived in this village till the need to earn a livelihood brought my great-grandfather, Sopanna, to Surapura taluk. Thus it was that a branch of the Malagatti family tree came to be in Surapura. My progenitors wandered from place to place in search of livelihood. My great-grandfather had two sons, Nagabasappa and Iyappa. Taking them and his two daughters along, he travelled to Ranganapete, Mannuru and Talikote. The rambling ended for them when they reached Muddhebihal in Bijapur district and put down roots there.

Grandfather Nagabasappa's wife hailed from Talikote; grandfather Iyappa's wife belonged to Mankani. When the efforts to settle down in their spouses' maternal homes did not succeed, they journeyed once again. Their migratory wandering eventually ended at Muddhebihal, but their work warranted extensive travelling to places as far-flung as Hubli, Sollapura and even Madras. They dealt in leather, and it seems they would load leather and chappals into bags and roam from place to place, selling them wholesale.

My grandfather Iyappa was perhaps the first lettered person among the dalits of north Karnataka. He had studied up to seventh class. His brother, Nagabasappa, who was initially engaged in leather work, did not study. Gradually, as money came in, a piece of land was bought and Nagabasappa settled down to agriculture. When the time came for the property to be divided amongst the brothers, Nagabasappa said to Iyappa, who was well versed in law, 'Give me my share in the education you received.' At this, the inflexible Iyappa took Nagabasappa's eldest son, Yallappa (my father), under his wing, educated him up to the seventh class and got him a job as a schoolmaster. 'Were you not asking for your share in my education? Look now! I give you your share!' he announced. Although my father wished to study further, it was not possible.

Grandfather Iyappa was a bailiff in the office of the tehsildar. That's how he had acquired some knowledge of the law. This man believed he enjoyed the right of ownership to everything that was worth having in his house. As long as the family stayed together, Iyappa's wife and children and Iyappa himself maintained that the major share of milk and dairy should go to them. The rationale was that he earned more than anybody else. In those days, nobody had any dispute with this line of thinking. Grandfather Iyappa had three daughters and three sons. Grandfather Nagabasappa had a daughter and five sons, two of whom died in their youth.

Grandmother had brought with her a buffalo from her maternal home as a gift. Later, when the family could supplement that by buying their own buffalo, it spelt the

beginning of a new occupation for them. Agriculture sustained them, albeit in a minimal way.

I am Nagabasappa's grandson. My grandmother had always harboured a deep pain that her own children were denied an adequate supply of milk and curd in their childhood. A permanent feeling of discontent lodged in her heart at the discrimination between children in the sharing of milk.

Once, when a lizard fell into the pot of milk boiling on the stove, Iyappa had ordered that the milk be thrown away. 'Don't give the milk to the children. The milk is poisoned and could be fatal,' he had said. But milk was scarce, and how could milk so rich in cream be simply thrown away? Grandmother thought and thought through the night and reached a decision. 'If one has to die, let us all die together.' Gathering all her children around her, she gave everyone the milk, also drinking some herself. She then went to sleep, all her children around her. Although her mind believed all her children would be dead by morning, a part of her heart refused to believe it. Let us see what this test of luck brings us, she had said to herself, as she drank the milk and fed it to her children.

Swallowing a scorpion could do no harm to this body. So why be afraid of a mere lizard, she asked herself. Waking up the next morning, she rejoiced, 'I am alive!' She shook the children awake and, finding that they were alive too, her joy knew no bounds. My grandmother felt like the man who walked into the sea to end his life only to find that the water only came up to his knees! Grandmother would recount this incident as if it were a folk tale.

There is the story of an old woman with several children and grandchildren. In all her life, this old woman had never known any hardship. One day, she was seized by a desire to weep. Notwithstanding all her attempts, she failed to cry. After all her children had gone to sleep, the old woman shaped the image of a child out of dough, wrenched its neck and imagined that the child was dead. She was just about to cry when the decapitated head attached itself to the body and the flour-child came alive and began laughing. The old woman too started laughing at the turn of events! My grandmother likened her own situation to that of the old woman in the story. To bicker over milk, to argue over children, to fret and fume, to agonize, then reconcile the differences were common occurrences in joint families.

Although uncompromising, grandfather Iyappa was also just. Rather than offer money to destitute people, he showed them ways of earning a livelihood. He liked to hold forth on the virtues of self-confidence, pride and individuality. People bowed as they greeted him. But the pride and self-confidence all melted like ice when he was outside his street and settlement. To behave in one way in front of the upper castes and in an entirely different way with one's own was natural in those days.

To exemplify the kind of anger Iyappa was capable of, I would like to quickly recount an incident that led his community to excommunicate him. Iyappa's own protest was full of defiance. He had loaned some money to Sopanna of the old bazaar in exchange for the latter's house. This Sopanna had lived in pomp in days gone by. He was the owner of a house built with mortar! The entire house was not built with mortar, though. Stones and mud were also used and only the front of the house was cemented. So the house came to be called the 'mortared' house.

Sopanna's greatest sorrow was that he was childless. Even a second marriage was not helpful. In desperation, he sought help everywhere but to no avail. He had spent everything he had and was now penniless. Not wishing to live in the same village any more, he pawned his house to Iyappa and left for Gulbarga, never to return.

Later, the brothers Nagabasappa and Iyappa went their separate ways after taking their share in the family property. When the matter of how the houses would be partitioned was being discussed, the unlettered Nagabasappa said to Iyappa: 'You know the law. You take the house mortgaged to you. Although small, let the old house come to me.'

Years later, Sopanna, who had married a widow and had had a son, returned to his old village, met Iyappa and said, 'Let me have my house back. I will pay the money I owe you.' At this, Iyappa remonstrated, 'Fifteen years have gone by since the date you should have redeemed your house. We live in that house now. It is not possible to give it back to you now.' Sopanna gathered the pancharu (the five elders of the village), asking for justice. According to the agreement, Sopanna had to redeem his house from Iyappa within five years.

'Who would return a house fifteen years after the expiry of the pledge? Not I,' maintained Iyappa.

When the pancharu threatened to boycott him, Iyappa stolidly stood his ground, sure that he was in a comfortable position. The pancharu then summoned Nagabasappa: 'He pays no heed to us. We will excommunicate him. Are you with us in this or with your brother?'

Nagabasappa turned to his brother and said, 'Iyappa! You should not snatch the roof over somebody's head. Let his house go back to him. We will divide the old house between ourselves.'

Iyappa remained stubborn. 'I will not give back the house. If you so want, you give him your house,' he said.

A hurt Nagabasappa retreated and said, 'My brother will not listen to me. Under the circumstances, I will support the verdict of the pancharu.'

Iyappa was excommunicated, but he remained undaunted.

‘The numskulls and their imbecile community,’ he cursed.

Whenever an opportunity offered itself, Iyappa took potshots at the community that had rejected him. Iyappa was not invited to any kind of social gathering, nor even offered the customary betel leaf that heralds any happy, auspicious social event in the community.

On these occasions, one saw the vengeful side of his personality. When he was not invited to a marriage ceremony or was not offered betel leaf, Iyappa declared, ‘As far as I am concerned, my community does not exist. It is dead!’ And then he performed the funeral rites of his community. People from other communities were invited to the lunch cooked at these funeral ceremonies. Likewise, when some elder from his community died, Iyappa celebrated the occasion. Holige was cooked and savoured at his home.

This went on for twelve long years. Iyappa’s behaviour was the cause of much embarrassment to his community. But nothing could be done. When the community made an effort at reconciliation, Iyappa spurned the move. Finally, when his daughter was getting married, the in-laws acted as mediators and facilitated the patch-up. My grandmother turned such events into stories and related them to us.

As bailiff in the court, grandfather Iyappa’s job involved legal impounding of property from defaulters of law. When he went to collect the dues, a chair used to be brought and placed near the village court pedestal. The official was to sit on the chair, examine the articles brought and certify that they were suitable for confiscation. Anything from money, vessels and foodgrains could be brought. As untouchables were forbidden from ascending the village court pedestal or even touching it, it follows that they could not sit on the pedestal. This also meant that they were not permitted to sit on the official chair that stood on the village court pedestal. My grandfather always sat below on the ground, his arms folded. His turban was placed on the chair he was to sit on; the sceptre stood leaning against the chair to its left!

Grandfather’s turban and sceptre commanded respect and enjoyed social prestige, but the man himself, although an officer, did not have the good fortune to receive any of that. He could only stand next to the village court pedestal like a bonded slave.

The defaulters who came, saluted the turban and the sceptre, and left the money and material on the village court pedestal. As if paying obeisance to an emperor, they approached the turban and the sceptre with ‘ji huzoor’, and without turning their backs to the turban and the sceptre, walked backwards till they finally genuflected out of the village court.

This phenomenon bore testimony to the fact that people had no qualms about bowing their heads to authority, but they would not submit to a low-born chamaar. What was interesting was that the same people did not look upon the turban and the sceptre worn

by a chamaar as untouchable. This sure was a blessing indeed! ‘The respect we show is for the authority, not the individual,’ is a sentiment we hear to this day. I have myself known this to happen when I served as director.

With changing times, it is only in form that the scourge of untouchability changes. The way you are spoken to changes but untouchability itself remains. If in a position of authority, an untouchable today might be accorded respect. But when I think back on the times my grandfather lived in, my body breaks into a sweat.

Grandmother told us how grandfather, on returning home after these occasions, enacted the scene at the village court pedestal! How the grand notables of the village, one by one, approached the turban and the sceptre on the chair, bowing low with their ‘ji huzoor’. ‘These blue-blooded highborn people, who salaam my turban and not me, should know that more than me, it is my turban that stinks!’ he mocked. ‘You who kowtow to my turban and sceptre on the chair, you should put my chappals on the chair and kowtow to them!’ he would hiss when he was at his vitriolic best.

This grandfather, who was a bailiff in the court, had the right to confiscate property in cases of default. The defaulters were usually people from the upper castes. For a dalit to be seen moving court those days was an unheard of thing. It was not his lot to even enter the upper-caste locality! Although he was an officer, grandfather was barred entry to the upper-caste locality. He could only wait, standing near the village court pedestal, while the town-crier was summoned to enter the upper-caste locality and announce the bailiff’s arrival.

Even today, villages abound in such practices. When an SC or ST person is elected president of a village panchayat on the reserved quota, there are many instances of them not being allowed to arbitrate sitting in the presidential chair. They are required to sit on a chair placed next to the official chair. There are also instances of dalit presidents abdicating the official chair to avoid the embarrassment of having to sit with the ‘notables’ of the village as their equals. Even in cities, when an officer who is an untouchable gets transferred, the chair he used is replaced with a new chair for the new official. What’s more, our country has witnessed situations like the one where, when a high court judge retired, the new judge, knowing his predecessor was an untouchable, sat on the judge’s chair only after it was washed, cleansed and purified. You may have money, you may have power but the affliction of untouchability will pursue you till the end.

The Bride in a Procession Holding the Buffalo’s Tail

Translated by Pranava Manjari

My grandmother was a copper-coloured beauty. Looking at a photograph from her youth, I wondered how a beauty like her could have been the wife of a man who looked like a dried piece of stick. Although my grandfather was a handsome man with a straight, long nose, he was also lean and lanky, resembling a variety of tall cacti.

When my grandmother carried two huge pots of water (each pot containing twice the usual measure of water), it is said that the menfolk, stood rooted to the spot and stared in wonderment. Some said, 'As if this male-woman can bear a child! She has only fat on her body. As if such a body can bear a child.'

Grandfather's moustache was a splendid affair. Curled and twisted, under and over, it was a delight to the eyes. No amount of admiration was enough. I had never seen his moustache myself—only in photographs and in my grandmother's description of it. Grandfather was a peaceable, long-nosed, handsome person. He may have been dark-complexioned, but he had a face that smiled always. Afraid that someone might fall for his charm, grandmother nagged him continuously. Not a day passed without her hounding grandfather. Then, greatly pleased by his tormented face, she would strut around the house like a conceited hen.

One day, after the jowar harvest had been filled into gunny sacks and brought home from the fields on a bullock cart, grandfather found that there was no help at hand to unload the sacks. So he released the oxen from the yoke and sat waiting for someone to come by. When no help came for a long time, Grandmother impatiently volunteered, 'Why wait for someone else? Am I not here to help?' Grandfather hesitated. The women and children of the street were watching. After all, a man's pride was involved, wasn't it?

When Grandfather refused Grandmother's help with the jowar sacks, she said, 'Come on! Why are you afraid? Are these not the same people who are around here everyday? So what if they see us?'

Saying this, she tugged at his hand so hard that the bones in the wrist were dislocated. After this, Grandmother single-handedly lifted every sack onto her back and carried it over to the inner storehouse.

One of the elders of Kallal's house commented, 'Yellavva! If a daughter is born, she should be like you. And with a daughter like you, why would anybody want a son?'

But that very elder was the one who had bet with Murala when my grandmother carried the huge pots of water, saying, 'This Yellavva will never beget a child. If she ever gives birth, that will be the day when the sun will rise in the west. Her body has

man-blood, not woman-blood.' He went on to add, 'If this woman gives birth, I will give gold equal to the weight of the child she bears.'

Murala replied, 'You cannot even bear the weight of the moustache on your face. Yet you brag about giving gold equal to the weight of the child she bears. Go! Become a bonded slave in gowda's house. When she gives birth, see if you can raise enough silver for the child's anklet. If not, you will have to lose your moustache!'

As a result of these people's wager, Grandmother did not give birth. Haunted by the desire for a child, she wasted away to a shadow of her former self, and some said, this woman who was a young buffalo is now only an old cow!

Grandmother prayed to every god possible; made vows, circled sacred trees, prostrated before every deity. She tried every native medicine. When a pandit suggested that swallowing a baby scorpion was the remedy, every hillock was scoured for baby scorpions. There were even days when Grandmother put her hand inside anthills, hoping to die of snake bite.

When the baby scorpions were found finally, it seems Grandmother's face swelled in elation to the size of a wide-mouthed hande (metal pot). The poison was removed from them and she swallowed three baby scorpions pressed into balls of jaggery. 'I can't bear the burden of being called a barren woman,' she explained.

At last, Grandmother gave birth. And to a male child.

Kallal was told to give the weight of the newborn child in gold. 'I was only speaking in jest,' he said, his face awash with sheepish smiles. 'Imagine taking a joke seriously.'

Grandmother proceeded to give birth to not one, not two, but seven children. Two were girls; five, like the Pandavas, were sons. Those in Nakula and Sahadeva's place died before their youth. Her firstborn, Yellappa, is my father. He died of a scorpion bite when I was only a year old. The scorpion stung him on his private parts. Too embarrassed to talk about what had happened, he only revealed the truth to my mother in his dying moments.

'I bore a child after swallowing a scorpion. That scorpion has caused my son's death. It has taken its revenge,' moaned my grandmother, her eyes moist with tears.

Grandmother was known to have rained blows on my grandfather's person in her younger days. 'Your grandfather beat me too,' she said. But all this happened within the four walls of the house. Outside the home, if anybody said a word amiss to hurt or annoy him, she was quite capable of pulling out the offending tongue and placing it in the owner's palm. Such was her fury. Everybody steered clear of her and did nothing to incur her wrath.

I was studying for my PUC when I became aware of how beautiful my grandmother was. It was a regular practice with me to rest my head in her lap and listen to her stories

and songs. As a matter of fact, it was my older brother, Ramasamy, who had started this practice. I merely followed him. Again, it was when I was in PUC that the habit of probing into her life began for me. I never interrupted her once she began her narration. Had my grandmother any inkling that one day I would chronicle all this, she would perhaps never have shared these stories with me.

When my grandmother stepped as a young bride into my grandfather's home, the house had nothing. They subsisted on daily labour. In those days, the people with the most lands were a family of goldsmiths. Their lands, located on Thangadagi road, had a rivulet flowing alongside. Even back then, the goldsmith family was shrewd enough to plant an orchard, irrigating it from the rivulet's water. They built a giant embankment just a kilometre from the orchard! Even our village could not boast of such an embankment! It stood as a symbol of their affluence—a stone wall six to nine feet high and a mud wall of the same height over the stone wall—a veritable fortress. The artistic, arch-shaped dam, meant to release excess water appeared to us like a grand monument.

Grandmother always recalled with pride that she was among those who worked to build the embankment and the dam. To me, the structures actually seem like a memorial to her. The joy I feel looking at them is the joy I felt looking at my grandmother.

Once, when my elder brother Basavaraju was a police inspector in Gadag and I was studying for my MA, nestling in my grandmother's lap, I asked, 'Aayi, tell me, which is the most unforgettable incident in your life? Something you would never forget even if you forgot everything else?'

Without a moment's hesitation, she said, 'My marriage. In my village, there were horses in the houses of the gowdas, desais and patils. These horses were taken out on bridal processions. Others had to make do with oxen, but for us, there was a ban even on using oxen. If a marriage took place without a hitch, well, that was a big enough thing. Nobody dared break the rules.'

Grandmother's maternal family was somewhat well-to-do. She was the only daughter in a family with seven sons. Though much protected and treated as if she was the rarest of the rare, she played all the games the boys usually played. She was brought up on a diet of butter, milk and curd, and even given a buffalo as a gift from her mother's home at the time of her marriage.

It was decided that Grandmother and her groom would sit astride an ox and be taken in a procession. The opposition that ensued initially was brushed aside. On the counsel of some elders, the plan was later abandoned and a buffalo was pressed into service to carry the bride and the groom. This was the first ever bridal procession from the harijan settlement. But the village was aware that the community did take out bridal processions in other places.

Nagabasappa, the groom, was seated on the buffalo and Yellavva, the bride, was preparing to take her place on the buffalo when an objection was raised, 'She has attained puberty before marriage. She may not sit on the buffalo.'

Arguments and counter-arguments followed. Then a heated discussion ensued on the penalty that would have to be paid for the transgression. It became a veritable quarrel.

'Aiyyo! They are hiding the truth and marrying her off.'

'This is wrong,' said some.

'We will never enter into a bond of marriage with these liars!'

'How can you say that you don't want marriage when the marriage is actually over?'

'You should have revealed that your daughter has attained puberty.'

And finally, 'They will pay a penalty for not being honest. They will have to make amends to the gods!'

A fresh quarrel broke out over the money to be paid as recompense. Subsequently, things cooled down. The discussion returned to the focal point of the bridal procession: the buffalo. The bride was not to sit on the buffalo because she had attained puberty before marriage. Instead, she was to walk behind the buffalo, holding its tail. As they say, 'either the betel leaf or the end of the betel leaf'. So also, either the buffalo or the tail of the buffalo.

Hearing about the procession on a buffalo, my grandmother had remonstrated, 'I will not ride a buffalo in procession; take only him on the buffalo.' But when she was told she was only to follow the buffalo, holding its tail, she recoiled with, 'Go away! Who wants this marriage? I want neither this procession nor this marriage,' and fell to the ground stubbornly.

She was coaxed and cajoled to listen to the elders but she refused to budge. Finally, her mother said, 'You need not hold the buffalo's tail; you hold my hand and I will hold the tail with the other hand.'

It was a Herculean task, but the recalcitrant Yellavva finally came round.

The procession was over. The five elders of the village felt enormously proud that it had taken place. Grandmother always boasted about the procession and how it was the first from her community. Some castes took out their processions on horseback. To take out a procession on an ox was also a prestigious matter, and a prerogative allowed to some castes only. Grandmother never forgot to mention that she hired horses for the marriage processions of her children.

After Grandmother told me this serio-comic tale, I thought I would write about this incident, together with others she had narrated, in a novel. That did not happen! I have chronicled at least this story here, lest it too slip from my thoughts.

Grandmother is a rebel indeed. She was aggressive about everything, using her mouth and hands to good effect. 'This is the only way one survives in this world,' she would say. 'If you are soft, who cares? You cease to exist even when you're alive.'

True, Grandmother is dead today, consigned to the earth. But it is only her body that is gone. But, as she always said, she remains alive.

Sitting on the shores of her sea of experience, I collect a handful of water from time to time and drink from it. Unable to hold it all in the handful I collect, I feel sorry for myself. But in a corner of my heart, I feel grateful for what I am able to hold in my hands.

Ambedkarite Ideology and Modern Kannada Literature[1]

Translated by Ramdas Rao

[…] In order to understand the depth and scope of Ambedkar's ideology and assess its worth at the national level, one needs to measure it against the work of his contemporaries. […]

In nationalist accounts, Ambedkar is represented as an untouchable fighting for his community (a leader of the mahar caste), the framer of the Constitution and a convert to Buddhism—but not as a national leader. Even when these writings discuss significant debates that actually involved Ambedkar and Gandhiji, Ambedkar is never named.

My intention here is not merely to point out how Dr Ambedkar was an untouchable for many non-dalit writers but also to show that this situation prevails in modern and contemporary Kannada literature. Are these writers shy or are they afraid of mentioning his name? I'm not saying that a writer is obliged to declare that he has been influenced by Ambedkar in his writing, for no work of creative literature is by another writer's influence. Nevertheless, it is sheer blindness to refuse to acknowledge such a presence when it manifests itself in a work.

For a full assessment of Ambedkar's impact on Kannada literature, one needs to analyse his philosophy. But considering the limitations of this essay, I have chosen to focus on how this philosophy works in a creative text.

There are profound differences in the conception of the dalit among modern literary movements in Kannada. While it is possible to sharply demarcate the differences between Navodaya [Modern] and the Dalit– Bandaya [Dalit–Rebel] writers, it is more difficult to distinguish between the Navodaya and Progressive positions. The silence of

Navodaya writers about the dalit community is striking. This silence gradually disappears in the post-Navodaya period. In fact, this silence is one provocation for a strong articulation of dalit issues in the Dalit–Bandaya movement.

Navodaya Literature and Ambedkar's Philosophy

Ambedkar is a considerable influence on Navodaya writers, but there is no mention of him in their writings … Even Gandhiji, who deeply impressed the society of his time, was not accepted readily by a number of Kannada writers. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Vivekananda and Aurobindo are the figures that captured their imagination …

The most significant fact about the Navodaya movement is that its major writers were all brahmins. With none to match them in stature, they became the sole spokesmen in the literary field. Their control over the print media ensured that only their writings reached ordinary readers for whom these writings were sacred truths. These brahmin writers were engaged with the problems faced by brahmin women and brahmin men living on the cusp of modernity. Novels such as *Indira Bai* [1899], *Indira* [1908], *Maadiddunno Maharaya* [As You Sow, So Shall You Reap, 1915], *Madhava Karunavilasa* [The Play of Madhava's Mercy, 1923], *Kanyabali* [Bride Sacrifice, 1927], *Dharmasere* [The Prison of Religion, 1934], *Susheele* [1915], *Priyamvada* [1922] and *Matrunandini* [1916] are filled with issues faced by the brahmin community. Sufferings of widows, child marriage, women's education, tonsuring of widows, the custom of sati, crossing the seas, brahmin men entering hotels to partake of coffee and dosa—such problems and issues loomed large in their picture of the world. Problems faced by the dalits didn't engage their attention at all.

It is true that reformist brahmins revolted against the brahminical order in a manner that roused the ire of traditional brahmins, but this reformism didn't relate to the sufferings of dalits. In other words, brahmin writers weren't prepared to expend their physical and intellectual resources on the issues of the dalit community in the way they addressed the internal problems of their own caste. So we need to ask: to what extent can we accept the reformism of Navodaya literature as progressive? This will enable us to understand their consciousness of the dalit condition. Apart from the problem of brahmin men frequenting hotels, what seemed to preoccupy the writers were the difficulties faced by brahmin women. But even when they highlight women's problems, they take care to preserve the woman's purity. On the issue of the Hindu widow having to shave her head, they argue that only child widows should be spared from this custom; a woman who becomes a widow after years of marriage doesn't deserve to be remarried [and may be tonsured]. Considering that their progressivism suffered from these limitations, it is but natural that the problems of dalits don't enter their consciousness. Their engagement with dalit problems is at best sporadic and half-

hearted. This token reformism regarding dalit issues contrasts sharply with their full-blooded reformism when it came to their own society. We can clearly see this trend in the writers who emerged after the first phase of modern Kannada literature, such as Masti Venkatesha Iyengar, Goruru Ramaswamy, D.R. Bendre, Shreeranga, Shivarama Karanth and Jadabharatha. Karanth is among the more progressive of these writers but his thinking gradually merges with that of other writers.

This half-hearted reformism is clearly apparent in the field of short story. By half-hearted reformist thinking, I mean edicts like: dalits need to purify themselves with a bath; should wear white clothes; should worship God; should sing bhajans; should not be impertinent; should conduct themselves with due modesty and humility; should not cross limits laid down by their superiors—the list is endless. Examples of such regressive thinking are Bendre's *Uddhara* [Deliverance], Goruru's *Hemavathi*, Karanth's *Devadutharu* [God's Messengers], Shriranga's *Vishwamitra Srishti* [Vishwamitra's Creation], Vithal Hegde's *Aparadhi Yaaru* [Who is the Culprit?], Katpadi Shrinivas Shenoy's *Swanubhava* [Self-Experience], *Holeya Hudugi* [Untouchable Girl] and *Narapungava* [Eminent Man], among others. Dalit characters (both men and women) that appear in all these works are invariably modest, humble and innocent. They bear their suffering patiently, and willingly submit themselves to the authority of the priest. In life-threatening crises, they come to the aid of upper-caste characters and transform them.

Such thinking is based on Gandhiji's philosophy. Ambedkar's philosophy is quite different, for he believed that in the matter of entering a temple or a hotel, mere persuasion won't bring about a change of heart. Ambedkar believed that 'rights are not willingly ceded, they have to be seized.' Navodaya writers completely reject this mode of thinking among dalits. What is interesting is that even while faithfully reflecting Gandhiji's thinking, the writers do present characters that counter his thinking, yet they never identify the intellectual progenitor of this counter-opinion. Rather, the text ridicules this position and attacks its author. Bendre's play *Uddhara* provides a good illustration of this tendency.

This play depicts three types of dalits: those who accept and preserve the status quo; those who exist in this system, yet rail against it and talk about revolution; and those who yearn to convert to another religion. Kodandaraya belongs to the second category. He is an impetuous man and often gets carried away by his rage and indignation. The play seems to suggest that dalits in the first category are superior to others and are to be preferred. In contrast, Kodandaraya's revolutionary thoughts are shown as immoral and sinister. A lawyer by profession, he seems to embody a negative image of Ambedkar. The play upholds the ethical superiority of Gandhism over Ambedkarism. Dalits in

Hemavathi and other stories have been similarly portrayed. *Hemavathi* categorically affirms the value of Gandhism and implicitly rejects Ambedkarism.

Against the backdrop of the Poona Pact, my argument about the Navodaya movement's rejection of Ambedkar applies equally well to stories such as Shivarama Karanth's *Geddha Doddastike* [The Victor's Arrogance, 1979], *Ade Uru, Ade Mara* [The Same House, the Same Tree, 1977], R.S. Mugali's *Baalu* [Life, 1942] and Sriranga's *Vishwamitra Srishti* [Vishwamitra's Creation, 1934]. While taking up the cause of unemployed brahmins, these stories are actually criticizing the reservation policy. As a consequence, even though they reject the caste system, these stories have a different agenda: that it leads to the exploitation of the brahmins.

Brahmin writers really felt the impact of the dalit question in the context of conversions: 'You react only when the water reaches your own feet.' Shudra writers too felt it and a consensus emerges over conversions, as is evident in works such as *Hemavathi, Chomana Dudi* [Choma's Drum], *Malegalalli Madumagalu* [The Bride of the Hills, 1967], *Kaanuru Subbamma Heggadathi* [Subbamma, the Landlady of Kaanuru, 1936].

Like brahmin writers, shudra writers too showed little awareness of the dalit question. Their interests lay elsewhere. For these writers, Hinduism was not vedic brahminism alone. They staked their claim over the religion and asserted their identity within its confines. Their confrontation with brahmins and fight for dignity within the Hindu fold is a major feat. This is revealed in many of their works.

In Kuvempu's *Kaanuru Heggadathi* and *Malegalalli Madumagalu,* the predominant concerns are education, conversion, the trials and tribulations faced by zamindars, spirituality and the institution of the family. A large number of dalit characters feature here but their problems are limited to issues of inter-caste love or conversion. Hence, issues that really concern dalits, such as temple entry, the right to draw water from a well or a pond, or the right to enter a hotel, do not feature in these major novels at all. The insolence of a converted dalit character, like Bachcha is highlighted. Somaa, who steals dog meat, agonizes over whom he should share it with. These novels, in dealing with the cultural conflicts of their time, make a show of dwelling on the problems of dalits but only when they don't threaten the interests of the shudra community. Conversion is such a burning issue in these novels that it takes us to the threshold of armed struggle. But other critical issues of dalits do not feature at all. I wish to explore the reasons for this partial portrayal.

One explanation could be that, for the shudra writer, the dalit issue is not an issue at all, or one that is best avoided. This is because many issues that agitate dalits hinge on the fraught relationship between dalits and shudras. When a progressive writer proceeds to attack brahminical priesthood, he is compelled to condemn priesthood

among the shudras too, and identify himself with the dalits and fight for their rights. When his writing turns towards dalits, his shudra characters will naturally stand out as arrogant. This will undermine the very foundation of shudra identity. This psychological anxiety perhaps explains why, even when the social problems of the time are recorded in these novels, it is at best a partial and incomplete portrayal.

When Ambedkar's *Who Were the Sudras?* [1946] and *The Untouchables* [1948] first appeared they caused an uproar. In 1962, when Kumara Venkanna translated these books into Kannada, there was an even greater uproar. He reports that some complained that they did not reflect Basavanna's thinking, others that they were anti-brahmin. They stopped the Social Welfare Department and the Textbook Committee from buying or prescribing the book. The social welfare minister declared, 'What the harijans need is food, not books,' and stopped its dissemination.

It is worth examining Kuvempu's novels against the backdrop of this controversy. Naturally, one is not assuming that he read Ambedkar's books before writing the novel.

In the Hindu caste system, brahmins occupied the apex position, keeping the other three castes under their intellectual control. Similarly, the shudras exercised social and economic control over the dalits. Shudras were in need of Ambedkar's ideas but they were unable to accept his leadership in the prevailing cultural climate. It is for this reason that Kuvempu's writings invoke Buddha and Vivekananda but not Ambedkar who brought out certain unpalatable truths about the religious and social aspects of the caste system.

We move now from the religious and social spheres to the economic sphere and examine, from Ambedkar's philosophical standpoint, the relationship obtaining between dalits and non-dalits as portrayed in these novels. A number of major Kannada novels at this time deal with issues of toil on the land as well as the struggle for ownership over land. Examples include Karanth's *Chomana Dudi* that appeared in 1933, Kuvempu's novels of 1936 and 1962 and Niranjana's *Chirasmarane* [Eternal Remembrance, 1955]. Kuvempu's novels feature gowda landlords, while Karanth's novel features brahmin landlords. Considering that neither of these castes was interested in the issue of land ownership in Karnataka, *Chomana Dudi* is a remarkable achievement. It is extraordinary that, in this novel, a dalit should assert his right for land even before land reforms actually came into effect. This has been deservingly valourized by critics. In 1920, Ambedkar starts his political movement with the publication of the magazine, *Mooka Nayaka* [Mute Leader]. In 1927, he launches his struggle for the abolition of vetbegarpaddhathi [unpaid labour extracted from dalits by landlords]. The main demands of his movement are: dalits should become owners of their land, and practices such as bonded labour, carrying dead cattle and doing menial jobs like delivering messages should be ended. Soon, Ambedkar's movement is extended to cover other

movements: a struggle is launched against the koti zamindari system prevalent in Maharashtra, in which he assumes leadership of the farmers' movement and starts the Independent Workers' Party. The main demands of this struggle are: removal of the vetbegar system and abolition of zamindari; distribution of patta and forest lands among dalits; regulation of minimum wages and minimum working hours; land to the tiller, and so on. It is noteworthy that, in extending his 1927 struggle, Ambedkar became a leader not only of the dalits but also of the farmers' movement.

When we examine the situation in Karnataka in the light of these developments, we realize how here too landownership became a critical concern for brahmin as well as shudra landlords. It is this cultural context that explains the appearance of a novel like *Chomana Dudi*. It is but natural that this novel, set in a realist mould, should have elicited opposing responses. Impelled by the notion of 'land belongs to the tiller', as well as the government's scheme for distributing patta land among the landless, the zamindar is moved to show sympathy for Choma's plea for land. Yet he is unable to act on that sympathy since he can't convince his own mother in the Gandhian manner to grant Choma's plea, nor is he convinced enough to act on it himself. Choma, who persistently tries to convince them, fails in his attempt.

Karanth's novel is a deeply significant work because it constitutes a departure from the half-hearted reformism of his time. His 1931 short story, 'Setty Sala' [Shetty's Loan], also deals with the issues of tenancy cultivation and chala geni [a form of sharecropping] as well as the relations between brahmins and shudras.

In works like *Bettada Jeeva* [The Man of the Hills, 1935] and *Geddha Doddasthike*, we do see [what appear to be] major shifts in the ideological attitudes towards dalits. These shifts can be attributed to changes in the cultural and political situation of that time, but they also reveal the attachment to one's own community. The character Batya in *Bettada Jeeva* is like Choma. Devoting his life to the service of Gopalayya, he turns an entire forest into fertile land. Narayana establishes his ownership over land on the basis of his caste, but Batya, who stands there with desire in his eyes, is ridiculed and trivialized by the narrator. Here the author himself turns into a character while remaining the omniscient narrator. Thus, in its treatment of dalits and in dealing with issues related to land distribution and reservations, these works and others do not go beyond a half-hearted reformism. […]

Let us turn to the cultural and political changes taking place at this time. We see that, in 1928, the struggle against the vetbegar system turned into a farmers' struggle. Ambedkar realized that, since dalits are not tenants, agitating for 'land to the tiller' only ensures that shudras, and not dalits, became owners of the land. Dalits would remain labourers. Concluding that farmers' leaders were only interested in exploiting dalits for their own interests, Ambedkar broke away from the agitation and formed a Scheduled

Castes Federation in 1942. The Poona Pact and the appearance of revolutionary writings such as *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* [1945], *Who Were the Sudras?* [1946], *The Untouchables* [1946] and *Hindu Code Bill* [1951] had a cataclysmic effect on the reformists. They were shaken to the core, since it was no longer possible to view 'artless' dalits with condescending sympathy. In brief: when they demanded their rights, dalits appeared detestable and frightening—and so did Ambedkar. It is this shift in attitudes towards dalits (including Ambedkar) that gives rise to a character like the lawyer Kodandaraya.

Artless dalits are the true dalits, while dalits demanding their rights are not dalits at all—this attitude was manifested not only in literature but in society too. Gandhi, who used to show compassion towards bhangis, missed no opportunity to revile Ambedkar. When Ambedkar challenged the customary rights and privileges of brahmins in social and religious spheres and those of the shudras in social and economic spheres, these two groups came together to brand him a traitor to the nation. It was inconceivable that Ambedkar's national stature be acknowledged and it is entirely natural that no traces are found in pre-modern and Navodaya literature of any direct influence of Ambedkar. However, the impact of Ambedkar, even if unacknowledged, can be felt just below the surface.

Now, we turn our attention towards the poetry of the Navodaya period. Buddha appears everywhere in this poetry, partly because Gandhiji and Ambedkar invoked his name but also because the writers were proud that the Buddha belonged to this country. In his 'Bouddha Yatra' [Buddha's Journey], Shivarama Karanth calls Gandhiji the father of truth and nonviolence but finds Buddha to be its true progenitor:

I'll say it again and again, he is no Gandhi.
I know full well, this is no new philosophy.
Sowing the seed and watering it, he has left,
in the flow of time, the venerable Buddha deva.

Actually, as Bhagwandas has pointed out, the source of Gandhiji's philosophy was not Buddhism but Jainism, which provided him with the weapons of non-cooperation, satyagraha, boycott and fasting. Ambedkar was different. He accepted Buddha's philosophy of non-violence, but equally felt the need to exercise discrimination when non-violence was impossible and violence necessary.

During his Mahad Satyagraha [1927], Ambedkar had warned the Hindus that he would convert if they refused to reform their religion: 'I was born a Hindu but I won't die a Hindu.' Accordingly, in 1956, he left the ossified religion of Hinduism and

converted to Buddhism. In 1929, many dalits had converted to Islam. In fact, there was keen competition among votaries of different religions to convert dalits at this time.

A number of Kannada writers of the Navodaya movement have written about Buddha. Among them are D.R. Bendre, V.C. Shrinivasa, Kuvempu, Pu Thi Narasimhachar, Shivarama Karanth, Govinda Pai and D.S. Kirki. Govinda Pai's *Vaishakha Shukla Poornima* [Summer's Full Moon, 1940] is a significant work in this regard. Pai writes not only about Buddha, but also about dalits. The works of Govinda Pai and D.S. Kirki resonate with the pangs of untouchability leading to conversion. However, while Pai's songs seem progressive, their intellectual thrust and attitudes are questionable. His writings from 1930 are mostly translations but from 1956 he produces original songs of joy that seem designed to win dalits over to Buddhism. Evidently, Ambedkar's revolutionary influence is at work here. All the same, Pai's writings revile conversion to other religions**.** A significant instance is a poem in *Vaishakha Shukla Poornima*, in which he shows enormous concern regarding Gandhiji's fast during the Poona Pact without going into the issues underlying his fast. All this betrays the ambiguity of Navodaya writers' attitude towards Ambedkar.

Pragatisheela and Navodaya Literature: An Ambedkarite Perspective

Emerging from under the Navodaya shadow, Pragatisheela [Progressive] writers formed a new movement. While the Navodaya writers never freed themselves from the grip of nationalist ideology and casteist thinking, we find a few Pragatisheela writers struggling to resist it. Some of these early writings played a significant role in the shudra cultural movement that I will discuss now. In fact, it is the rise of these two movements that presaged the Dalit–Bandaya struggle.

Two of the most prominent writers of the progressive movement that come to mind are Niranjana and Basavaraj Kattimani. I would like to take up for discussion from a dalit perspective three works: Niranjana's *Chirasmarane* [1955], and Kattimani's *Nee Nanna Muttabeda* [Don't Touch Me!, 1954] and *Harijanayana* [The Story of Harijans, 1979]. In the context of the land struggle that we have discussed earlier, *Chirasmarane* and *Harijanayana* deal respectively with the pre-Independence and post-Independence periods. From an Ambedkarite perspective, *Harijanayana* leaps to one's attention. Basavaraj Kattimani is the first writer in Kannada to directly apply Ambedkar's thoughts to a literary work. Both his works reveal Ambedkar's ideas in full measure. But these thoughts are not transmuted into the artistic realm and remain set pieces that the various characters mouth. The names of Lohia, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Marx and Lenin resound through the novel but the writer refuses to creatively explore or commit himself to any one philosophical perspective. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm for Ambedkar and a

high regard for the other thinkers are evident here. Kattimani's *Nee Nanna Muttabeda* goes one step further and boldly declares that Gandhi and his disciples are a bunch of frauds who will not emancipate harijans. All this shows the influence of Ambedkar's *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* on Kattimani. His novel throws into sharp relief the chicanery of the Congress leaders, the deep differences between Gandhiji and Ambedkar, the dalit bourgeoisie, the oppression of dalit women and destitution among dalits. In contrast, *Harijanayana* lacks the sharp edge of *Nee Nanna Muttabeda*.

Though Niranjana's *Chirasmarane* seems to be cast in the Marxist mould, it is imbued with the spirit of Gandhian thought. It deploys the Marxist discourse of class struggle in the service of nationalism and social critique. However, as a novel of social realism, it begs the question: 'Where is the dalit in this social and nationalist imaginary?' It might be argued that, in a novel dealing with the issue of class struggle, the caste issue is an irrelevant one. But this is not quite true, considering that the novel allows for the presence of a Muslim character like Abukar but not that of a dalit. For readers like me, it is a matter of regret that such a novel can make space for issues of Hindu religion and Muslim society, yet cannot accommodate dalits. In fact, in Niranjana's entire oeuvre, it is difficult to find even small traces of interest in the issues of dalits.

After *Chomana Dudi*, the two novels that have given the dalit issue a lot of space are S.L. Bhyrappa's *Daatu* [Crossing, 1972] and Ananthamurthy's *Bharathipura* [1973]. Both novels bring out the revolutionary implications of this issue.

Here, we need to deviate a little from the main line of our analysis. Generally, a work of fiction is not required to have a straightforward relationship with the reality it draws upon. In order to understand the nature of this relationship, one needs to step outside the intrinsic mode of criticism that remains faithful to the original premises of the work. Such a mode of criticism is relevant and useful where a literary work internalizes the structure of a philosophical system. But if the philosophy is distorted and apportioned arbitrarily to different characters, thereby flouting its original intent, the critic is compelled to question the artistic integrity of the work, despite its artistic worth.

These observations apply with special force to the novels of Bhyrappa and Ananthamurthy, as well as to the preceding novels discussed in this essay. These novels have, in various ways, chosen to twist the thoughts of Ambedkar and assign them to representative characters of non-dalit communities to suit the author's ideology. In Ananthamurthy's novel, which is in the realist mode, Ambedkarite ideology has been attributed to a brahmin hero, whereas in Bhyrappa's novel, it is enacted through two very different characters, a dalit man and a brahmin woman. Both these novels are

replete with Ambedkar's ideas but they are expressed through characters from non-dalit backgrounds. Ambedkar's thoughts are put into the mouths of representatives of non-dalit communities. Is this a correct representation?

Jagannatha, the prominent brahmin character in *Bharathipura*, voices the revolutionary thoughts of Ambedkar. However, his personality reflects strong undercurrents of Gandhian and Lohiaite thinking. Bhyrappa's novel reflects Ambedkar's thinking as it evolved until the 1940s. (After 1940, Ambedkar's thinking itself underwent a significant shift.) These thoughts are polarized in the characters Satyabhame and Mohandas. If brahminization is embedded in the consciousness of the brahmin woman Satyabhame (it is to be noted that such thinking does not reflect Gandhiji's ideas), Mohandas, serving as her dalit counterpoint, is opposed to the ideology of brahminization. Till 1935, Ambedkar's thinking remained in the traditional mould. This is revealed in his attitude towards the struggle among dalits for adopting upper-caste names.[2] In *Daatu,* Satyabhame proposes the adoption of the twin practices of adopting upper-caste names and wearing the sacred thread. Gandhian ideas are also blended into her make-up. She thus becomes the simultaneous embodiment of Ambedkar's revolutionary stance and an ideal of customary virtue, thereby heightening the manifold prestige of brahmin society. Mohandas's dalit character suffers in comparison, serving as a mere revolutionary counterweight to vedic brahminism. In fact, this character extends Ambedkar's revolutionary practice to such an extreme that it alienates the ordinary reader.

When Dr Ambedkar launched the next phase of his revolutionary struggle, he called it 'Lota, Roti, Beti'. 'Lota' symbolizes the struggle for water, 'Roti' for intercommunity dining and 'Beti' for inter-caste marriage. Public reactions to Ambedkar's charter of demands are interesting. Gandhi didn't support these dalit demands at first but eventually conceded them, albeit by suggesting that upper castes be won over, not by means of agitation but by love and persuasion. As a matter of fact, these means are more of an obstacle for dalits than anything else. As for the upper castes, when it came to the issue of inter-caste marriage, they felt that it was a dangerous course of action. Hence we need to consider the issue of Satyabhame's marriage in the light of the Gandhi–Ambedkar divide on this issue.

In his intellectual make-up, Jagannatha in *Bharathipura* is not essentially different from Mohandas of Bhyrappa's novel. Following Ambedkar, Ananthamurthy's hero talks about mobilizing the power of dalits and writes in the manner of an atheist about assaulting the temple and displacing the idol with a human being. He is also imbued with the spirit of Gandhiji and Lohia … Despite living in a brahmin-dominated town and enjoying the privileges of a brahmin leader, Jagannatha dares to oppose brahminism and emancipate the dalits (such an enterprise is not very different from the project of

brahminization). One can only surmise Ananthamurthy's compulsions in writing this novel … The 1970s was a period of raging revolt by progressive shudras. His novel *Samskara* was caught up in a heated controversy, especially with regard to the dalit woman character, Chandri. He also faced a boycott by shudra activists with a narrow cultural animus against a brahmin writer. In this climate, he was perhaps driven by a desire to propitiate dalits and progressive critics. One could argue that Ananthamurthy wrote *Bharathipura* in a self-justificatory mood. Its brahmin protagonist betrays a bourgeois mentality towards what he sees as identity-less dalits. Even a character like D.C. Shivaprakash fails to become a protagonist. While Ananthamurthy was busy trying to triumph over his critics, Bhyrappa is not bound by any such ideological predilections. Intent on castigating dalits for their rage and indignation, Bhyrappa created two representatives of Ambedkarism, Satyabhame, the brahmin woman and Mohandas who is a half-baked, reductionist version of Ambedkar. Works such as these came as a response to the pressure exerted by dalit consciousness on non-dalit writers in the 1970s, a decade not known for any agitation by dalits for temple entry.

Most writings in Kannada about the issue of temple entry come from brahmin writers, who consistently present this project as abortive or, if successful, leading to disastrous consequences. But in actuality, we know that, during the freedom struggle, there were many such episodes of temple entry that spread in serial fashion and many of them were successful too. While these texts are stereotypical in their presentation of identity-less, innocent dalits, it is not proper to sweepingly dismiss these representations, as many critics have done; this is not to say that all these criticisms are prone to exaggeration either.

Dalit–Bandaya Literature and Ambedkar's Philosophy

Born under the inspiration of Ambedkar's philosophy, the Dalit–Bandaya movement doesn't need much elaboration. This is not a concessive argument, for when a philosophy forms the framework of an entire literary movement, the movement will naturally become the voice of that philosophy. Ambedkar's philosophy inspired dalit writers in the same way that Marxism influenced the writers of the Bandaya school. Initially, the Bandaya writers used to write about the dalit revolt in terms of class struggle, but gradually, their writings ended up foregrounding the issue of caste. This signals a shift from advocacy of Marxist ideology to that of Ambedkarite ideology.

Since dalit writing is imbued with the issue of cultural conflict; even if that ideology is not overtly expressed, it is internal to the very texture of the writing. These writings (especially in poetry and fiction) declare that 'every caste also constitutes a class'. Both dalit and non-dalit writings are marked by themes such as inter-caste marriage, fraternity, equality, liberty and the rallying cry 'Learn-Mobilize-Struggle'. Devanoora

Mahadeva, Aravind Malagatti, Manaja, Mullur Nagaraj, Channanna Walikar, Baragur Ramachandrappa and Kum Vee are some writers that come to mind. The major preoccupation of dalit writings is the need to rid dalits of the internal caste system. These writings also record the internal struggles of dalit organizations as well as criticize the bourgeois tendency among certain dalits.

Ambedkar, Marx and Lohia are said to be the main influences of the dalit revolt in Karnataka. While this is true of Ambedkar and Marx, Lohia's influence is barely perceptible here. Nevertheless, his name is invoked in a tokenistic fashion by shudra writers who joined this movement.

In their novels, Channanna Walikar and Kuvempu express themselves sharply and without inhibition, unlike Baraguru Ramachandrappa in *Surya* [The Sun, 1990] or *Seelunela* [The Forked Earth, 1980]. While these two novels affirm the dalits' struggle for power, they imply that dalits have no identity, no agency. They seem to suggest compassion as the sole basis for dalits to achieve power. Of course, these observations do not apply to all his other writings.

A few remarks about dalit poetry are in order. Just as there was a flood of poetry about Gandhiji during the freedom struggle, there was an outpouring of poetry about Ambedkar in this movement. Practically every poet has produced poems about Ambedkar. But these writings are of uneven quality, with very few poems having the emotional calibre that marked Navodaya's subjective poetry. Yet, while the poems are nominally about Ambedkar, they have uncovered the lives of dalits as well as the hypocrisy of reactionary political leaders and have put to test Ambedkar's thoughts.

Major Conclusions of the Study

Just as political philosophy has yet to recognize Ambedkar as a national leader, his influence on creative literature in Kannada has been felt but not acknowledged.

Earlier, the Navodaya writers highlighted brahmin social issues, and the problems of dalits didn't engage them. Like the brahmin writers, shudra writers didn't at first recognize the problems faced by dalits as real, preoccupied as they were with elevating their own caste. Only when they were confronted with the reality of conversion among dalits were they compelled to turn their attention to the social problems faced by dalits. But the reformism is at best tokenistic and is often half-baked … Writers advocating such reformism were usually under the compelling influence of Gandhism.

It is in the writing that comes after the Navodaya movement that problems faced by the dalits receive serious attention. This was probably due to the emergence of a dalit consciousness. However, the treatment that Ambedkar received in these writings was partial and wilful: the qualities they extolled in Ambedkar appeared in the 'good'

characters and the qualities they didn't favour went into the making of revolutionary characters. The path of revolution was not adjudged to be a proper one for dalits since it couldn't solve their problems. This is a trend of thinking that continues well into the writings of the Dalit–Bandaya movement.

Except for Kattimani, writers of the Navodaya, Pragatisheela and Navyottara movements couldn't free themselves from the influence of Gandhiji's thinking. Their writings were replete with issues such as conversion, temple entry, brahminization and untouchability. Many of these writings (even from Dalit–Bandaya movement) tend to see dalits as powerless, with feeble minds, without going into the question of who is responsible for this state. This tendency—to regard dalits as powerless—is not found in dalit texts. […]

If people in Karnataka have been reluctant to recognize the intellectual contribution of Ambedkar, it could be due to various reasons: his published writings have been difficult to find; his philosophy and thinking are alien to today's generation; and so on. The publication of his collected writings (in twelve volumes by the Government of Maharashtra) has opened the eyes of many of the present generation and silenced a vocal opposition. In this context, a number of questions arise: why did Ambedkar's name take much longer than Lohia's to establish itself in Karnataka? By citing casteism, are we underestimating the active role of intellectuals? Or is it a result of indifference? If so, what is the reason for this indifference? I hope I don't have to expressly answer these questions once again.

It is true that Ambedkar's ideas have many limitations. After all, no philosophy can be relevant for all times. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that such a philosophy is much needed in a society like ours that is rooted in the caste system. To give his writings the critical attention they deserve is the best tribute we can give Ambedkar.

L. Hanumanthaiah

L. Hanumanthaiah, a member of the Karnataka Legislative Council when we spoke to him, begins this account of his own life with his grandfather's 'struggle for his life and land'. Kare Hanumaiah, who was the village talawara (head servant), walked the 200-odd kilometres from his village near Doddaballapura to Mysore to get a piece of land from the Wodeyar rulers. He succeeded in receiving a sanction of four acres. The orders were sent to the amuldar of Doddaballapura who passed it on to the village shanbog. The shanbog sat on the information and did nothing about it despite Hanumaiah's repeated polite reminders. Since Hanumaiah was the village talawara, he used to accompany the shanbog on his daily rounds. Often they had to use a lonely forest route. One day, in the uninhabited middle of the forest, Hanumaiah stopped and raised his stick to hit the shanbog, who immediately fell at his feet saying, 'No, no, please do not hit me; I will grant you the land. Above all, don't tell anybody what happened here.'

L. Hanumanthaiah's parents, Lankappa and Chennamma, were agricultural labourers. Throughout the early years of the writer's life, his father was a bonded labourer. Hanumanthaiah is the first in his immediate family to receive a formal education. 'That happened,' he recalls, 'because my uncle, Sunderraj Clemento Madhuraiah, was a teacher in the village school.' He adds: 'The records carry my date of birth as 10 June 1958. In Karnataka, if you see a June date of birth, you can be sure it is not the actual date. June is the time schools reopen after the summer break.' He studied in the village school up to the fourth class, moving on to the upper primary school in Doddabelavangala. Even today, his eyes shine when he says, 'I was very bright; I could recite my tables backwards and in the seventh I got 98 per cent in maths.' Reflecting on his education, he says: 'I am an Ekalavya; I had no teacher.' He was also a popular speaker and debater and represented his school and college in competitions. Hanumanthaiah completed his schooling in 1973 and moved to Bangalore for his pre-degree and graduate education. He received his BSc in 1979 and passed the bank entrance exams to join the State Bank of India that same year.

During the crucial mid-1970s of the boosa episode and its aftermath, he was a student in a social welfare hostel. 'Boosa divided the whole of Bangalore, in fact the whole of Karnataka, into SC and non-SC,' he says. Hanumanthaiah recalls that when he was a first-year student, Basavalingappa came to speak at a hostel function: 'Pointing to a plaque in the hall that read *Dharma Rakshapana, Dharma Rakshita* [dharma will

protect those who protect it], he said, "This dharma never protected me, a dalit, or my people, although we have followed it for 4,000 years. It has thousands of gods but not even one of them has said that untouchability is wrong."'

Hanumanthaiah was involved with the activities of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti from its very inception and that was the context in which he began reading Ambedkar. 'During the earlier literary movement, led by B. Krishnappa, I was a student but in the DSS I was an activist, working alongside writers such as Devanoora Mahadeva, Siddalingaiah, K.B. Siddaiah, H. Govindaiah, O. Sridharan[1] and others.'

He was also an active participant of the Bandaya movement—a dalit protest literature movement—becoming first the Bangalore city convener and then a state convener of the organization, a position that he held for three terms. 'In the mid-1980s, when a new wave of anti-reservation outbursts had started in Ahmedabad, we held a seminar in Bangalore supporting reservations, with Kuldip Nayar as the main speaker.' Hanumanthaiah's first article, published in *Samudaya Varta Patrika* was written in this context: 'These movements were very important, not because of material gains but because youngsters began to feel "we can change the system; issues of common people can be made central".'

He himself became a serious student of Kannada literature and studied the dalit and Bandaya streams in Kannada literature. He wrote about the Vachana movement as basically a dalit movement because of the way it confronts the caste system in Hinduism. He also drew attention to the stature of Madara Chennaiah—a madiga, whom the poet Basavanna refers to as his 'father'—in that movement. In 1984, Hanumanthaiah completed his MA in Kannada Literature, and in 1997 defended his Ph.D thesis on dalit consciousness in Bandaya stories. The thesis was published in 1999 as a book, *Kathakathana*, that was reprinted in 2010. A play he wrote, *Ambedkar*, was performed by the well-known theatre group Ranganirantara in 1998. This may be the first play on Ambedkar written or performed in India.

In the 1990s, following on the initiatives of the Madiga Dandora movement in Andhra, the madigas in Karnataka also took up the question of separate reservations for the community. The activity was led by a section of the DSS affiliated to the BSP—B. Krishnappa's group. Hanumanthaiah played an active role in these discussions. 'The madiga question is the inner soul of my poetry,' he declares.

His first collection of poems *Kappukannina Hudige* (Black-eyed Beauty) was published 1990. He went on to publish three more collections of poetry *Avva* (Mother,1995); *Akshara Aksharave* (Letters, O Letters, 2002); and *Karunarage* (Melancholic Tunes, 2008). Most of his poetry, he points out, is autobiographical. 'I have written about my mother and my father, my grandfather, my aunt; about their struggles for the life and sustenance of my family. I also write about my history and my

background and the experience of untouchability.' A poem titled 'Shield', is a prescribed text in the PUC syllabus. 'The Two-headed Bird' is a reading of globalization that reflects, from a dalit point of view, on the dominant Kannada opposition to it.

Mother

Translated by Vanamala Viswanatha

Your neck unadorned
but for the black beads;
deprived of letters,
you walked the path of your desire in penance
seeking the necklace of letters;
kissing the mouth of snake holes,
you demanded sweets from serpents,
Mother.
Torn shorts
embellished with white thread;
warmed castor oil
combed into parted hair;
kumkuma dot on the forehead;
meat-pot-soot-darkened eyebrows;
'May the eyes of Mari Masani die spluttering,'
you said, warding off evil eyes, and
tapping them into the ground where three roads meet.
Books tucked under the armpits,
our journey to the next village begins.
Standing under the tamarind tree,
tears rise from deep within your eyes.

The crop you raised
you never ate;
you only bound tight
the cloth over your empty stomach.
Selling sesame, horse-gram, castor seeds
to middlemen
putting away the small coins,
you waited
for the tender shoot of your womb
to mature,
Mother.

Feeding us hot food in the light of the moon,
setting us down on a soft bed of torn saris,
suckling us to sleep,
you lay your strained body
on a rough palm mat.

Selling ghee, you paid
for father's frolics.
When the wheel of life
was stuck in defeat,
you lent your shoulders,
swollen under the weight.

Roaming the fields,
you bundled your gleanings
with an alasadi creeper,
and carried a snake-load inside.
When you stepped outside to empty your plate,
you feared you'd stepped on a banana stem.
The heartless snake circled your ankle, and stung.

As the lamp without oil
struggled to chase the dark away,
the wick of life
waned with every throw of
the shuttle of Time.
At daybreak, before sprinkling scented water
on the turmeric-rubbed threshold,
you left.

Father

Translated by Vanamala Viswanatha

The cradle of affection afloat
on an ocean of compassion;
miles away from
the vile and cunning,
you are the moonlight
that bathes the firmament of life,
a babe amidst the corrupt and profligate,
a lamb with thick wool
that turns into a warm blanket,
a potful of milk.

The base of clay under the potter's feet,
the tip of the blacksmith's flame,
the sharp edge of the till,
you became the eternal teardrop,
the shore of the Ocean of Truth,
the Good Soul smiling through the starry world
in the expanse of the sky.

O Master!

You are like the wisdom that courses
through the green of every plant,
like the taste and colour that manifests
through every root and branch.
You are the stringed instrument
and I the bamboo sliver.
O great spring of syllables
on the wayside
in the shade of the banyan tree,
O sweet bud in the garland worn by the beggar
dreaming of becoming king,
you who reined in bitter neem with sweet mango,
you had no compassion
for those who killed affection.

Clothing yourself
with the burdens of others,
worshipping work,
you are a yogi,
who never sowed seeds of fatigue,
a whirling stream of sweat cascading through hills and dales,
the seed inside a ripe fruit.
You are my fortress,
you, everlasting green,
the magnanimous Karna
of tomorrow.

Mahadeva Shankanapura

‘The history that we read in school or college never tells the story of the untouchables or the other small communities,’ Mahadeva Shankanapura says. ‘It is the history of a few powerful communities. Society in general does not feature there. After I read Ambedkar, Romila Thapar and Kosambi, I came to the conclusion that there is much that we do not know; and that it is necessary to rewrite history in a way that is more inclusive. I wanted particularly to work on dalit history and culture.’

This historian of dalit culture was born in 1961. His father worked as a bonded labourer with a banajiga-lingayat household in Mudigunda. ‘Almost everyone in our village was a bonded agricultural labourer in one or the other of the households in that village. My parents, my sister and I worked in this lingayat house and on their land. That was the atmosphere I grew up in. I remember the way the landlords behaved … they wouldn’t touch us. If they had to give us something, they would drop it from above into our hands. We lived on whatever little money and grain they gave us. I found this gap between them and us strange. We didn’t have the opportunities they had. These things troubled me …’

He studied in Shankanapura up to the fourth class, moving to Kollegal in the fifth and completed his high school and college studies there. Mahadeva then went to Mysore for his masters degree. ‘Our teacher was an OBC. He was good to us … though he’d make us do chores for him at his house, like fetching water or firewood. He’d also give us something to eat. He did not make all the children do this—only some. I was one of them. It’s strange: it’s not like he *didn’t* want to educate us dalit boys; actually, he was rather fond of us. But we were scared that he’d cane us if we didn’t answer his questions. Yes, he made us feel inferior and stupid. We felt we didn’t know anything. The indignities and humiliations I suffered as a child—that my whole community suffered, in fact—have been bottled up. My parents are both dead. My mother died of uterine cancer when I was doing my BA and my father died of throat cancer during my MA years. They never knew any happiness in their lives. My sister is a widow. Her husband drank heavily and he died of it. My father drank a lot too,’ he recalls and falls silent.

Mahadeva’s sister was married early. But he went on to do his masters in History, and acquired the degree in1995. Thereafter, Mahadeva taught part-time for many years, unable to get a regular job. Only in 2003 did he get a permanent post. After that, he

worked in Coorg for about five years before returning to his old college in Kollegal in 2008. Mahadeva was a part-time lecturer in a local college when—with the support of the People's Movement for Self-Reliance, headed by Dr Jakkaiah who created a special wing for this kind of research—he began working on the dalit culture in the Chamarajanagar and Old Mysore district. This part of south-western Karnataka borders both Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and has a layered history of alternative traditions, some of which, as we shall find, Mahadeva is carefully documenting.

Mahadeva's village, Shankanapura, is a holeya settlement. Close by is the Jain centre, Bastipura, which dates back to the Ganga Dynasty (fourth to tenth centuries). The Jain saint Pujyapada lived there. Mudiguna, which is about a kilometre away, traces its history back to the time of the Cholas (late ninth to early thirteenth centuries) and is largely inhabited by banajiga, a lingayat land-owning caste, which he described to us as 'worse than brahmins in their rituals of purity'. A distinctive variant of Kannada is in general use in the area, which appears also in the writings of Devanoora Mahadeva. The area is also famously associated with the predominantly dalit traditions that have emerged around the figures Manteswamy and Malemadeshwara. Speaking of the Manteswamy and Malemadeshwara traditions, Mahadeva observes: 'When we talk about spiritual leaders, we only remember the Buddha, Ramanujacharya, Shankara, Madhava and so on. However, there are others who are equally important … who've worked for freedom, equality and fraternity, who have envisioned humanity and democracy in a different way. I am interested in the latter and especially those who were untouchable. I wanted to emphasize the strength and complexity of this critical culture.'

His first book, *Maary Habbagalau* (2001), documents the festivals and other cultural practices associated with Maramma. Mahadeva drew on oral sources and quickly realized the potential of such an archive and the historical wealth of his region. His second book, *Manteswamy Movement: Chikkaluru Jatre* (2002), deals with the Manteswamy tradition as does a 2010 booklet published by the Kannada Open University. A book on the equally important Malemadeshwara tradition, *Maleya Madaiahana Samskritika Charitre* (Cultural History of Male Madaiah, 2011) was commissioned by the Kannada University in Hampi and appeared as part of its 'Mantapa Male' series. In 2008, he published a book of essays on folk literature, politics and culture, titled *Naalige Melina Charitre* (Story from the Top of the Tongue). 'There is clearly more oral history than written history in the world, hence the "tongue"; this is the theme that the essays deal with,' he elucidates. A collection of poetry, *Urigaddigeya Mele Bolu Jangamana Tamboori Pada* (A Bald Ascetic Sings on a Burning Heap) was published in 2009. The three initial poems in that book, the first of which has been translated here, won the Prajavani Poetry Prize in three consecutive years starting 2006.

The egalitarian, caste-free Manteswamy and Malemadeshwara traditions date from the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. Both belong to a Shaivite line and are madiga and holeya respectively. Even today, their 'priests' are from these groups, although their followers include all castes except the brahmins. Mahadeva rejects the suggestion that these may be mythical figures. 'They are mentioned in several other literary texts of the period and later, and the places associated with them actually exist or existed,' he responds sharply. From his work with these traditions, he says, he understood that orally transmitted knowledge is a rich parallel archive to those used by modern historians 'who trust stones, but not people' and a principal source from which a history of dalit people—which is today obscured both by brahminical and modern history and ideology—can be pieced together.

Manteswamy's philosophical thinking is nested in the discussions he had with those from whom he sought 'alms', many of them politically and economically more powerful than him. As the story of 'iron as alms' in the essay translated here also indicates, he 'begged' not for food or money but for 'children, land, property'. He received these alms after struggles, debates and arguments with the powerful.

Mahadeva told us: 'This casteist and imperialist society has denied a decent life to many such people, communities … This troubled me always. This system that pushes them towards such degradation is extremely inhuman. I go through this indignity even now. I am an assistant professor today but even so, when I go looking for a house to rent, I am sent away when they find out my caste. If I try to buy a piece of land to build a house on, the forward-caste neighbours ensure that I don't get it since they wouldn't want a holeya in their midst.'

These experiences were also central to his literary life. 'My interest in literature developed while I was working for People's Movement for Self-reliance. I began writing while in a non-academic career. When I was a student, I was connected to the Ambedkarite dalit movement and the farmer's struggles. I started writing poems when I was doing my BA. I don't speak much … even now I hesitate to speak. I am rather shy. Because of this, I felt there was so much I wanted to say but couldn't. All these thoughts stayed unsaid in my mind. Even now, when I am speaking to you, I feel I am not communicating my thoughts completely. So I write to get over this handicap, to give a release to the ideas welling up in my head … I felt that there was so much in life that literature hadn't captured. I felt I should work in that area. I felt I should rebuild our history and culture and our experiences through poetry … to rewrite. I wasn't convinced by the existing history. I felt I should write it in a different way. That is the way I started working on it.'

Speaking about the DSS, he picks out Devanoora Mahadeva and Siddalingaiah for mention as truly influential, adding, 'Personally, I got the opportunity to work for the

NGO People's Movement for Self-reliance as a result of what I learnt in the DSS context. I worked for it for four or five years. Then, when my part-time job at the college was made regular, I was stationed in Coorg for five years and had to move away. Later, I came back to teach in the college I studied in and have been able to continue my work.'

The poem and two essays that have been translated here provide a rich sense of the living traditions that Mahadeva speaks of here, the people that practise them and the philosophies that sustain them. They are also evidence of the depth of Mahadeva's knowledge and interest. A number of terms appear in all three texts and are, therefore, being glossed here.

Neelagara are professional religious singers who are mostly madiga. They vow loyalty to Manteswamy, sing his praise and recount his deeds. The traditional Neelagara dress consists of a black jubba, red headgear (rumalu) and a white dhoti tied crosswise (kachche panche). A shoulder bag to collect alms and a stick completes their make-up. Tamboori is their main instrument. Also central to the tradition is the kamsale, a cymbal-like instrument. Devotees of Malemadeshwara and Manteswamy perform a folk recital, also called kamsale, that uses this instrument.

Other terms that appear are from the important religious (the term is not entirely appropriate for these life systems) traditions that Shankanapura describes. Thus 'siddhi' can be translated as 'perfection', 'attainment', or 'enlightenment' and may be used to describe people who have accomplished that. In some traditions, it specifically refers to the acquisition of supernatural powers by magical means or the faculty to do so. A sharana is 'one who has surrendered' and refers in common parlance to a lingayat; natha, a follower of one of the tantric shaivite traditions. Aarodha is a mystic who is freed from the deception of a separate world; he is said to be truly liberated and cannot even be said to have had a birth, while avadhoota refers to a mystic or saint who is beyond ego-consciousness, duality and worldly concerns and does not respect common social norms.

On the Trail of the Flaming Feet[1]

Translated by S. Jayasrinivasa Rao

Did the body's sea
heave in tumult to become

the fiery sandals of the true sharana?

You know it as the hide of awareness.
For the unaware, it is but footwear left outside.
Did you leave desiring the company of your soulmates?
How far did you go, fleeing the brutal butcher mob?

There was no meeting; no soulmate;
only a quiet cool river, and a
body drenched in heat.

The great house banyan shades the cellar.
Stone slabs cover the body.
The shivalinga turns into a pillow.
From the depths of the well, emerges the chant:

Heaven lies in your deeds; heaven lies in your deeds.

One lakh ninety-six heart-searing stitches, and
the flaming sandals are ready.
Those with guts may try them on and name a price.
Remember King Shravana who made an offer?

Madhuvarasa's lineage does not yet know
the power of these sandals.
They must wait to be immersed in curing waters.
Nothing remains of that first inspiration.
The festivities are over, Basava.
When the bloody knives came chasing,
where did you, fevered, stand?

Do you know, Basava,
I sat, fevered, there, here, wherever and
chanted your name

that Allamma would know
this pain and this pleasure.
They do not think, they cannot speak, oh my guru!
Why did you sew mouths on all and sundry?

How many hold on to their word?
Shiva, shiva … grass has grown over the tongue.
Unable to utter the pearl-like words,
The linga of light doesn't concur.

Beware! Auspicious Monday approaches.
The jewel is not in Kalyana.
Maadari Madeva has started
towards the seven-hills Kailasa
carrying the fiery sandals.

He is proclaiming the warrior …
The dream of Ram's utopian kingdom will shatter.
Manu's law book will go up in flames.
The assembly[2] of the shameless will now
explode.

Throughout the world, and across the skies,
is echoing already, another
Ambedkarite roar:
Go and write on your walls:
We are the rulers of Independent India.

Malemadeshwara Tradition: A Counterculture

Translated by S. Jayasrinivasa Rao

The Malemadeshwara tradition of the Kamsale Devaragudda is a very important and significant cult in the Karnataka folk tradition as well as in the Kannada cultural sphere. The *Malemadeshwara Kavya*, which emerged from this tradition, is a major epic in Karnataka folklore. If the *Kalevala* of Finland is recognized as the longest folk epic in the world, Kannada-land's *Malemadeshwara Kavya* occupies the proud position of being the second longest. The *Manteswamy Kavya* of the Neelagara tradition too is a long epic.

The literate and cultured vedic religion and society not only denied literacy to the 'desi' communities who constitute the majority of the Indian population but also isolated them socially and through religion. This created a huge chasm between human beings. We have a great (if obscured) history of cults and traditions rising up in defiance against inequalities. Beginning from Gautama Buddha, and traversing the vachana movement, these cults and traditions flow like subterranean currents. To this day, cults and traditions like Malemadeshwara, Manteswamy, Junjappa, Tippeswami, Mylara, Kodekallu and others founded by siddhas, sharanas, nathas and sufi saints continue.

The vachana movement of the twelfth century fought against the unequal established order. But it did not succeed and soon became a caste/ community within the system. This prompted the subjugated and exploited communities to rise in revolt against the casteist, unequal and inhuman systems established by the classical vedic culture. The results of this revolt are these sung folk literatures and cultures.

Malemadeshwara was a historical figure who, through his mystical powers, offered his life for the betterment of desi, backward and tribal communities. Like the Buddha and Basavanna, Madeshwara too became an alternative religious and cultural icon for the desis and dalits. The oral history of Malemadeshwara's achievements, woven together by the Kamsale Devaraguddas, is the *Malemadeshwara Kavya*.

The Ballala king's copper inscription of 1315 AD (Chamarajanagar, Haradanahalli taluk), Haider Ali's copper inscription of 1761, poet Devachandra's *Rajavali Kathasara* of 1838, poet Gurusiddha of Meenya's *Madeshwarasangatya* of 1750, an unknown author's *Niranjana Vamsharatnakara*, Sangappa Shastri's *Suttooru-Simhasana Guruparampare* and other inscriptions and literary works have references to Madeshwara. Though these pieces of historical evidence don't give us the exact period of Madeshwara's existence, they do confirm that Madeshwara lived sometime from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries. It is known that Manteswamy also lived during this time but, despite being contemporaries, there is no clear evidence to show that there was any meeting or interaction between Madeshwara and Manteswamy.

There are references in Karnataka's histories to the arrival of two Buddhist bhikshus, Mahadeva and Rakkhita, from northern India to Mahisha Mandala (Mysore). They were propagating Buddhism. There is a suggestion in certain histories that these two could

actually be Malemadeshwara and Manteswamy. Coincidentally, the inscriptions and literary works mentioned above say that Malemadeshwara and Manteswamy actually came from northern India and settled down in the Dark Kingdom today known as Karnataka. From the clues found in their folk epics and in the places where they lived and moved around, and from Devachandra's *Rajavali Kathasara*, it is widely known now that Manteswamy and Madeshwara belonged to the untouchable castes of maadara and holeya respectively.

Clues are also found in folk epics and folk tradition suggesting that Madeshwara originally belonged to the South (Karnataka) and went to northern India and came back. Another understanding is that Madeshwara was an enlightened natha of the Shaiva school of Srisailam and that he left Srisailam to settle in Karnataka and start his own order. What the *Malemadeshwara Kavya* depicts as his life and attainments is supported by evidence in inscriptions and literary works.

In the poet Nanjundaradhya's 'Sri Shivaratri Shivacharya', it is mentioned that Madeshwara joined a group of young jangama from Srisailam and guided them towards Suttur. Siddananja Desika was the head of the Suttur Matha at that time and Madeshwara was given the job of grinding ragi (the stone he used is still at the matha). Madeshwara felt that he was not given due recognition and so left to join the monastery at Kunthooru. At Kunthooru, he was given the job of plucking and gathering flowers. Unlike other children who would go to collect flowers, Madeshwara would play around and kill snakes, scorpions, ants and chameleons and transform them into fragrant flowers. The guru, who heard of this miracle told Madeshwara, 'You are far superior and wiser than me,' and asked him to move on. Heeding his guru's advice, Madeshwara knelt down at Muradigudda (Kollegal) and looked up. All the monasteries around that area disappeared from his sight and he proceeded towards the distant Kailasa on Seventy-seven Hills.[3] The thrust of the *Malamadeshwara Kavya* and tradition and Malemadeshwara's own attainments are shrouded in symbolic incidents, like ash-covered embers.

The episode of the leather sandals and the slaying of King Shravana are significant episodes in the kavya as well as the tradition. According to the kavya, Madeshwara was born to slay King Shravana and release the 330 crore gods held captive by the king and forced to work for him. The kavya opens with this episode. When Madeshwara says that his name is 'Madaiah', the king hears it as 'Maadari' (cobbler) and asks Madeshwara to make a pair of leather sandals for him. Using this as a pretext, Madeshwara asks one of his followers, Haralaiah, to make the sandals and uses these sandals to slay the king. The slaying of the king symbolizes the defeat of evil as also the victory of desi, backward and tribal communities.

Madeshwara also convinces and wins over Halambadi's Junjegowda of the shepherd community through miracles and makes him his follower. Madeshwara then asks Junjegowda to construct temples, tanks and bunds on the central hill of the Seventy-seven Hills Kailasa and settles down there.

According to the philosophy that says 'inner purity is more important than outer cleanliness', Madeshwara made people belonging to the lowliest of castes his followers—Mudukutore Mallayya, Biligiri Rangayya's followers, Saragura Ramavve, Moogappa of the uppaliga [salt maker] caste and Suggala. Madeshwara assigned these followers the privilege of serving him during his oil-bath ritual.

Madeshwara was a sharana with a pure and guileless mind. In case any of the lower-caste people refused to become his followers, Madeshwara would implore them until he prevailed upon them. He would receive their services so they felt he too was an untouchable in all respects and that he held spiritual values. The *Malemadeshwara Kavya* foregrounds these aspects. 'If my poverty is banished and prosperity is ensured, I will become your follower; I will name my children after you; I will offer you my harvest,' Bevinahatti Kalamma made this vow. But after her wishes were granted through Madeshwara's kindness, she strictly instructed her daughters-in-law not to give even a grain of rice or sesame as alms to any jangama [veerashaiva ascetic]. Madeshwara goes to Bevinahatti Kalamma's house and seeks sesame as alms and she insults him by not offering him any. He demolishes her house and curses her. While this episode represents the conflict between the desi matriarchal and patriarchal societies, another episode, 'Sankammana Saalu', depicts the coming together of these two. For Soligara Sankamma, Madeshwara is a friend in need, one whose heart melts on seeing human suffering; he is the divine wish-granting tree, kalpavriksha.

When Soligara Neelegowda, according to the custom of his caste of honey-gatherers, was to go into the forest for nine months to hunt and gather honey, he was in two minds about leaving his wife Sankamma alone in the house. He feared that some tantrik or sorcerer might seduce her and lure her away. He wanted his wife to take an oath that she would never be attracted to other men. She is furious with her husband for suspecting her character and challenges him to leave her if he believed that she would behave in an unchaste manner. Neelegowda then keeps her under house arrest and treats her inhumanly. If this shows the face of cruelty that exists within men, the manner in which their family deity Madeshwara responds to Sankamma's plaintive cries for help by releasing her from captivity and blessing her with children and wealth, shows another face of man within the same tribal community. This also represents the conflict between matriarchal and patriarchal cultural values.

Madeshwara takes a giant leap away from this unequal world and settles down in the Seven Hills Kailasa called the Dark Kingdom, along with his followers Junjegowda,

Sankamma, Kalamma and others. He brings together all the desi communities and establishes his order there. Junjegowda and Sankamma and, more importantly, her young sons Karayya and Billayya become the pillars of this order. He establishes the 'Sologara monastery' for them, which is now known as the 'Salooru monastery'. But today, the ownership of this monastery has slipped from the hands of the soligas and is in the clutches of the veerashaiva lingayats. This is living testimony to how the entire Malemadeshwara movement/tradition is slowly losing its fundamental objectives and features, and is getting 'veerashaivized'.

Manteswamy Tradition and the Chikkaluru Jatre

Translated by S. Jayasrinivasa Rao

Most people would not be aware of the cultural significance of Kollegala taluk. This region's contribution to Karnataka's folklore, literature, culture, history and tradition is invaluable. It would not be wrong to say that Karnataka's *Malemadeshwara Kavya*, *Manteswamy Kavya*, Kamsale and Neelagara traditions all come from Kollegala taluk. From a historical point of view, Kollegala was a part of the Ganga kingdom and continued to be part of the Vijayanagara and Mysore Wodeyar kingdoms. Kollegala also gave shelter to a host of siddhas, sharanas, sufis and nathas and became their place of meditation. The insignia and tombs of these sages can be seen even today in this land where they practised their austerities and became one with the soil. All of this has added to the cultural richness of Kollegala taluk.

The originator of the twelfth-century Vachana movement, the one known as the first sharana, Maadara Chennayya, is a cultural treasure of the Kollegal, as are Honnayya's Kurubarakatte kshetra, Haralayya's Harale kshetra, Allamma's Kunthooru Prabhuswami Betta kshetra, Shambulinga's kshetra at Chilakawadi, Maleya Madeshwara Swami's row of Madeshwara Hills known as Elumale kshetra, and one of the important centres of the Manteswamy tradition, Siddappaji's Chikkaluru kshetra. Along with these siddhas and sharanas, a number of sufis also came and settled down in Kollegal. The shrines of Mardane Gaib at Shivanasamudra, Hazrat Turab Ali Shakhadri's shrine at Molaganekatte near Chikkaluru, Hazrat Wali's dargah near the Bala Siddappa hill are symbols of early secularism and religious harmony.

The traditions of these siddhas, sharanas and sufis have survived and continue to prosper through annual jatre, processions and rituals at their respective kshetras. Even today we find the neelagara and kamsale castes playing their tamboori and kamsale,

carrying snake-coloured canes and swords, going from village to village seeking alms. These are the people who preserve the Manteswamy, Malemadeshwara and other siddha–sharana traditions. They are cultural ambassadors who carry these traditions from one generation to another.

During the months of December, January and March, one finds neelagara minstrels in the Old Mysore region of Chamarajanagar, Mysore, Mandya, Hassan and Bangalore districts, singing songs of Manteswamy, Siddappaji, Malemadeshwara and others. Many people consider these singers a nuisance and look at them with contempt. Others find their attire, their musical instruments, their swords, sticks and alms bags disgusting. And all this is because people think that these are all blind beliefs.

But Manteswamy, Malemadeshwara, Mardane Gaib and other traditions actually have historical antecedents. History became folklore, folklore became culture and culture in turn manifests as festivals and customs. Among these cultural, historical and folk jatre, the Chikkaluru Jatre of Kollegal is the biggest in our region. This annual jatre is in honour of Siddappaji who built and strengthened the Manteswamy tradition and neelagara culture.

Manteswamy, Siddappaji, Rachappaji, Doddamma Thayi and Chennajamma are all historical figures and saints who carried forward the vachana and sharana movements of the twelfth century. They fulfilled the ideals and aspirations of Basavanna and Allamma in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. A number of literary works and substantial archaeological evidence provide information about these historical figures.

Manteswamy belonged to the ‘Dravida Desha’, a region that encompasses the Cauvery River and adjoining jungles in today’s Mandya and Chamarajanagar Districts. He was a disciple of Kurubara Lingayya who later goes to Kodekallu in Surapura taluk, Gulbarga district, to attain siddhi. There, he becomes a disciple of Kodekal Basavanna, a sage who modelled himself on the twelfth-century Basavanna and continued Basavanna’s teachings. After attaining siddhi and becoming a siddha, Manteswamy returns to his land in the south and brings Kodekal Basavanna’s son Rachappaji along with him. He travelled till he reached Boppegowdanapura, where he settled down, acquiring a number of disciples in various places along the way. Among the many people who became Manteswamy’s disciples, Kodekal Rachappaji was the first. Then he receives Chennajamma, the daughter of a snake charmer in Vijayanagara, as his next disciple. After Chennajamma, Manteswamy receives the Elder Eerappaji and the Younger Chennappaji, the sons of the king of Sakharayapattana, as disciples. And finally, Manteswamy comes and settles down in Boppegowdanapura, in today’s Malavalli taluk in Mandya district. Later, he receives Kempachari in Maaralli, belonging to a family of blacksmiths, as his disciple and transforms him into Siddappaji. In Aadi Honnanayakanahalli, Honnayya and Chennayya became his

disciples. Manteswami then instructs his disciples to settle down in various places and starts building the neelagara order. There is considerable evidence to substantiate this. References to Manteswamy are available in Kodekal Basavanna's great-grandson Veera Sangayya's work *Nandi Aagamaleele*. This work is a history of Kodekal and was written in 1589. According to Sangayya, Kodekal Basavanna lived around 1489. His disciple Manteswamy, who attained siddhi, also belonged to the same age.

Like the twelfth-century sharanas, Manteswamy and his disciples too wrote vachanas. Manteswamy has written thirteen vachanas. These were found in the Kodekallu monastery, where Manteswamy was a disciple of Kodekal Basavanna. One can see the ornaments and clothes worn by Manteswamy in the Boppegowdanapura monastery where he attained samadhi. His sword, his tamboori, his sandals and the other objects that Manteswamy used are preserved at the site of his samadhi.

Manteswamy asked his disciples Rachappaji and Chennajamma to settle down in Kappadi kshetra in K.R. Nagara, Mysore district, and Honnayya and Chennayya to settle down in Kurubarakatte, and Siddappaji to settle down in Chikkaluru. These episodes have been described in detail in *Manteswamy Kavya*. The samadhi of these disciples located at these places and the annual jatre and rituals held in their name are evidence that they lived in these places. Doddamma Thayi was Rachappaji's wife; when she was on her way to Kappadi kshetra, she had to stop in a grove outside Boppanapura due to some kind of ritual impurity and then just settled down there. It is believed that Phalaradayya also settled down in Boppegowdanapura. The annual jatre at the historical sites of siddha and sharana traditions like Kappadi, Chikkaluru, Boppegowdanapura and Kurubarakatte, and the neelagaras themselves are today the cultural ambassadors of this history.

Siddappaji is the chief siddha of the entire Manteswamy movement. Manteswamy makes Siddappaji his successor to lead the order and continue the tradition. Siddappaji becomes the next guru. Siddappaji is also known as 'Dalavayi [commander, as in the military] Siddappaji' because of this. Kappadi houses the temple and Chikkaluru is home to the guru's monastery.

Siddappaji and Rachappaji helped spread the Manteswamy movement and propagated its philosophy and ideals, built the Manteswamy tradition and the neelagara order and helped them grow. These two Manteswamy leaders, who had settled in Boppegowdanapura, wanted to establish the neelagara order in Mysore. In those times, the Wodeyar king of Mysore and the chieftain of Halagooru held sway over the region and were very powerful. By making these two rulers their disciples, the Manteswamy leaders were able to achieve their objective. Rachappaji and Siddappaji, by winning over these regions fulfilled their responsibilities efficiently. After achieving this, Rachappaji and Siddappaji settled down in Kappadi and Chikkaluru respectively, and

the rituals that their followers performed have over the years taken the shape of the annual jatre.

Siddappaji and Rachappaji play significant parts in the *Manteswamy Kavya* and the Manteswamy tradition. Siddappaji was the seventh child of Bachi Basavachari and Muddamma. The child was called Kempanna and his birth is said to have brought good fortune to his parents. In the face of abject poverty, they had moved to Maralli from Nidighatta. But with Kempanna's birth, their fortunes changed for the better and they became immensely rich. Manteswamy wanted to win over the Panchala chieftains of Halaguru and Chillapura and chose Kempachari, who belonged to the same caste as the chieftains, as his disciple. There is symbolic meaning in Kempachari being kept in a snake-infested cave in the Kunduru hill for twelve years and in the fact that he later became Siddappaji after this feat.

An ordinary boy from a blacksmith family, twelve years later, after performing seventy-eight miracles, becomes an accomplished master, a siddha. It is after this transformation that Manteswamy tied the sacred thread and initiated Siddappaji into the neelagara order. Manteswamy's neelagara order was thus inaugurated, with Siddappaji becoming the first neelagara. This is why Siddappaji is also known as the husband of neelagaras. Any neelagara who is initiated into the order has not only to perform certain rituals but has to also attain 'siddhi'. But today the neelagara initiation remains a mere ritual.

Following his guru's orders Siddappaji brings iron as alms[4] from the Halaguru chieftains and starts building his monastery. This incident describes how Siddappaji establishes, builds and expands the neelagara order and the Manteswamy tradition. Getting 'iron as alms' indicates the progress of civilization and culture. It is also an indicator of the revolutionary changes taking place and the progress in agriculture and industry. It denotes the gradual shift of the human gaze towards modernity. Along with these, the purpose of seeking 'iron as alms' was also to bring the ruling class and the general population into the neelagara order. To achieve this, Siddappaji had to pass seven tests with the help of his miraculous powers. There is enough evidence to show that Siddappaji was a historical figure, a man with miraculous powers and an accomplished siddha. One can see the places in Halaguru and Chillapura where Siddappaji worked his miracles—the ancient iron pillar and ancient iron blocks. After these miracles, Siddappaji builds a monastery and house for his guru at Boppegowdanapura, and on his guru's orders, comes to Chikkaluru and settles down.

The chill of the months of December and January, the milky full moon night, the crowds of people, the smoke from incense and camphor, the sounds of gongs and horns, and, louder than all these sounds, the lines from the *Manteswamy Kavya* sung by the neelagaras:

Siddayya Swami, welcome;

one who performs miracles, welcome;

Mante Lingayya, welcome.

One can see people everywhere, groups of people floating high after consuming the intoxicating toddy-laced prasada … this is what the Chikkaluru jatre looks like.

[…]

At a distance of twenty-six kilometres from Kollegal in Chamarajanagar district, one finds Chikkaluru in a forested valley beside the Cauvery River. On the other side of the Cauvery lie the Muthatti, Halaguru and Chillapura villages. After winning over the powerful Halaguru chieftains as followers through his miracles, Siddappaji comes to Chikkaluru carrying a big drum and sword and settles down there. That all the people in and around Chikkaluru began following him and that he settled down in Chikkaluru are miracles in themselves. The people of these seven villages come together and conduct the Chikkaluru jatre every year.

When Siddappaji came to Chikkaluru, the siddhas and sages there told him that he had to demonstrate his miraculous powers if he wanted to settle down in the area. Only if he won the prescribed tests could he build his monastery and install his kettledrum and other insignia here. Chikkegowda was made the moderator for these contests.

Two wells of human proportions were dug for Siddappaji and his competitor. They were put in and both wells were sealed with stone slabs that had seeds of leafy edible plants sown on them. The winner would be the one on whose slab plants would grow and sway in the breeze. He would be entitled to establish his monastery in Chikkaluru and the people of this area would revere him as a god. Siddappaji won this contest and his competitor, a siddha sage of Chikkaluru, became his disciple. All this is described in the kavya. This is the background for the Chikkaluru jatre celebrations. The jatre is held for five days and five nights, with a large number of people thronging Chikkaluru. Special rituals are organized each day. This jatre begins on a full moon day every year. The first day is devoted to the Chandramandala puja; the Doddavaraseve is held on the second day; Mudiseve on the third day; the Siddharaseve on the fourth day; and finally, on the fifth day, the Mutthattirayanaseve. Siddappaji's samadhi is located in Chikkaluru. Surrounding this samadhi are groves of tamarind, basari and kakke trees. To the left of the samadhi is the golden anthill, on the right is the badaga (north) door, a Garuda pillar is in the front and the Mutthattiraya temple is at the back.

The swamis of the Boppegowdanapura monastery and the Malavalli monastery, who are the gurus of the Manteswamy tradition, have the sole right to conduct puja and other rituals at the samadhi of the siddha and sharana. The right to conduct the Chikkaluru

jatre rests solely with the Boppegowdanapura swami. The progenitors of these two guru traditions were the disciples of Manteswamy and belonged to the families of the princes of Sakharayapattana, the Elder Eerappaji and the Younger Chennappaji. Rachappaji, who settled down in Kappadi, helped the Mysore Wodeyar consolidate his rule. In gratitude, the Mysore Wodeyar becomes a follower of Manteswamy and initiates a marital alliance with the Sakharayapattana rulers.

It is because of all these reasons that the Boppegowdanapura swami is bestowed with the honour of inaugurating the Chikkaluru jatre every year. The swami sets out from Boppegowdanapura wearing royal robes and a green turban tied in the Mysore style; he has a flowing beard. He holds a sceptre-like cane and a string of gems. The sacred bull walks in front, and behind him people walk holding the royal sword, parasol and fly whisk, blowing horns, holding kettledrums and insignia. The neelagara singers accompany this procession. The swami is the guru of the Manteswamy and neelagara traditions and an important saint after the chief disciples of Manteswamy. He is the one who conducts the jatre, puja and other rituals during these five days in Chikkaluru.

Chandramandala is the first event of this jatre and is associated with light. Chandramandala is also indicative of the prosperity of the agricultural community, which has successfully harvested its crop and stored foodgrains. Once Manteswamy had told Siddappaji, 'I will make the small village Chikkalli, which is close to Thellanooru, Kotthanooru, Baanooru, Balagunase, Iridalu, Ikkadalli and Sundralli villages, into Chikkaluru, and there I will name you as Chikkalurayya.' Following this, Siddappaji came back from Haluguru after seeking 'iron as alms' and brought together the people of seven villages, making them his followers and creating Chikkaluru. The annual event organized by the people of these seven villages is the Chandramandala.

People belonging to all the castes—cobbler, washerman and oil-miller, among others—living in Chikkaluru and the surrounding villages offer their puja separately on designated days during the jatre. All the people come together and construct the bamboo crown of the Chandramandala and create shapes of chariots and flames. The Chandramandala is made of bamboo and coconut fibre and is decorated with oil, ghee, flowers and plantains offered by the devotees. At around midnight, the swami offers puja at the samadhi and to the Chandramandala before setting fire to the latter. While the Chandramandala is burning, devotees throw fruits, money and grains into the fire to fulfil their vows. After it has burnt down completely, oil and camphor are mixed with the ashes and the devotees apply this mixture on their foreheads.

The Chandramandalaseve is believed to be the worship of the paramajyoti (light of heaven). While the flames are burning high and bright, based on the direction of the flames, people predict that that the villages located in that direction would get good rainfall and a bountiful harvest.

The Doddavaraseve is held on the second day to pay homage to and worship the elders and leaders of the tradition, like Doddamma Thayi and Rachappaji and others. On the third day, Mudiseve (offering of hair to god) is performed along with the neelagara deekshe (initiation). These rituals and services are considered important parts of the jatre for the survival, growth and expansion of the neelagara order. The neelagara deekshe symbolizes the entry of new followers and the continuation of the existing ones. Communities of people from generation to generation have been initiated into the order to become followers of, and to continue in, the neelagara tradition. Through this initiation, they continue to build and expand the neelagara order.

Manteswamy builds and expands the movement he started in the twelfth century by giving the neelagara oath to people belonging to all castes, communities and groups and bringing them into the neelagara order. To this day, except brahmins, people belonging to almost every community take the neelagara oath. When all the people of all communities become neelagaras, it will be possible to build a secular and casteless society. It will then be possible to establish equality, freedom, unity and work towards the survival of humanism. This is the great philosophy of this jatre, of this order and of the neelagaras. But, sadly, today the jatre is merely a 'ritual' and the real picture is completely different.

The fourth day of the Chikkaluru jatre is devoted to Siddharaseve or Panktiseve. This is a very attractive event. Freshly tonsured, newly initiated into the Neelagara order and shouldering the responsibility of carrying it forward, the new siddhas serve food to people who are seated in a row. Manteswamy followers partake of meat, alcohol and bhang [marijuana] as prasada. This collective event is called Siddharaseve. It appears as though siddhas took bhang in order to fulfil their tasks and to establish an equal society. This tradition has continued among neelagaras.

The last day's ritual is Mutthattirayanaseve. This Mutthattirayanaseve is actually a puja to Hanuman, who is a vaishnavite god and a follower of vaishnavism. Mutthattirayana befriends Siddappaji during Siddappaji's journey to Haluguru. One of the five days of the jatre is devoted to the puja of Mutthattirayana as a mark of this friendship. This friendship and the puja are symbolic of harmony and fellow feeling winning over the differences between castes, cults, communities and other man-made differences. On this day, neelagaras apply the vertical vaishnavite mark on their foreheads instead of their horizontal shaivite vibhuti. This may seem like an attempt at the vaishnavization of the movement. But it can also be considered a sign of harmony.

On the whole, the neelagara tradition has continued to exist as a movement that is syncretic in nature based firmly on bahujan culture, and which has, at the same time, incorporated into itself the practices of different cults and traditions.

It is now learnt that, until a few years ago, the Boppegowdanapura swami, on his way to the Chikkaluru jatre, used to offer puja at the dargah of Turab Ali Shakhadri. Muslims themselves worship Manteswamy as 'Maankshawali'. In the past, many years ago, Muslims used to visit and pay respects at Rachappaji's samadhi at Kappadi. Manteswamy's and his disciples' samadhi have the appearance of dargahs. The clothes of the swami, the cloth that covers the grave, peacock feathers, cane, sword, bear fur tied to the sword, leather straps, placing vachanas on the samadhi—all these are symbolic of the natha, sufi, siddha, sharana, aarodha, avadhoota cults and culture. The neelagara order has assimilated all these into its fold and has remained non-communal by not aligning with any religion or culture.

The neelagara order's customs, food culture, cultural practices, and so on are all expressive of the dalit, backward and minority communities and bring these groups together. The neelagara philosophy reiterates the earliest Kannada poet Pampa's saying that the human race is above all divisions like caste and creed, another great Kannada poet Kuvempu's concept of universal humanism and the Buddha's concept of bahujan primacy. We need to have the vision to see, ears to hear and intellect to understand this.

Mogalli Ganesh

This ‘second-generation’ dalit writer was born in 1962, in Mogalli, village in Chennapatna taluk. He was still at school in the mid-1970s when the boosa struggle was at its height. As a consequence, Mogalli Ganesh says, ‘before I actually entered the field of Kannada literature, I did not think much of it. I regarded literature as biased and as something in which we are not included and something that is not of much use to us. I was more interested in science. What is more, I grew up absorbed in the teeming life of our household, in which there were many fascinating characters. Literature, culture, the world of the educated did not have a hold on me.’

But the stories that his grandparents used to tell were a different matter: ‘Grandma was a treasure house of fantasy; my grandfather’s tales were mystical and he would expound on their moral and philosophical significance.’ Mogalli was also fascinated by evening sessions in the holekeri (the holeya locality), where people sat around, reported on the day’s events and discussed their everyday problems and struggles: ‘These casual conversations about real life were richer, I thought, than the acclaimed stories by the great Masti [Masti Venkatesha Iyengar].’

Most of his childhood was spent with his aunts and grandmother in a household that he describes as ‘a woman’s world’. His mother had killed herself when he was in class five. Mogalli says that she was unable to bear life with her ‘cruel, feudalistic husband. There are such characters even among dalits; everyone in our community, and even upper-caste people, were afraid of him.’ His father’s persona is visible in many of his stories, including that of the main character in ‘Buguri’, which is translated here. After his mother’s death, he says, ‘I felt orphaned and became depressed, though I continued to do well in school. Grandfather tried to make up for my loss with his stories and I would be happy to waft away into those worlds.’ When he was in class nine, his family sent him away to an uncle (working in the police, like Mogalli’s father) in Doddaballapur to study for his SSLC. Undergraduate studies took him to Maharaja’s College in Mysore, and he did his MA from the University of Mysore in Folklore Studies. Here’s the story about how he began writing, in his own words:

‘I began writing in college—initially I wrote poems which I shyly sent to *Dalita Vani*. When they were published, I gained confidence and tried writing a story based on my childhood, which Professor Nanjundaswamy of the farmer’s movement brought out. That was a period of incredible political ferment. I became convinced that what dalits

and working people needed was not poetry, but revolution. I joined the SFI and through it came into contact with botany professor Ramalingam, who was impressed by the Naxalites. He used to take me home; he introduced me to the Telugu Digambar Kavitalu and told me about Gaddar and other activists, singers and writers.

'That was also around the time Saket Rajan had returned from JNU. What a hero he was for all of us! I was thrilled when he published a story I had written in *Vimukthi* and had it translated for the Telugu journal *Kalam*, which he also edited. Since I was so busy with the student movement, I did not do well in my economics exams. What is more, the Naxalite movement was at its peak. The police suspected that Saket was visiting the hostel at night. They kept a watch on Banjegare Jayaprakash and me. One day, after a long discussion about all this, Saket suggested that we leave the hostel and go to Andhra Pradesh or Chikmagalur. Not that I had much of a choice. I had done badly in the exams, so I was not going to get a job based on my economics degree. Either I would have to do another MA, or think of a future with Saket. Moreover, everyone at home had moved on. My sisters had married; my brother had migrated to the city. Father had married again, twice, and both the women had committed suicide. I was scared that if I went back, he would kill me too. My uncles were not interested in me or my career. I felt abandoned and depressed, with few options before me. I said to Saket: "Brother, you are asking me to hold the gun. My shoulders are not strong enough for that. But I can hold the pen and whatever this bloody revolution requires, I can do with black ink." He said "do that" and went away. That was our last meeting.

'In 1989, I completed my MA in Folklore Studies. After that I had to leave the hostel. I had nowhere to go. I was depressed. One evening, there was a power failure. In the dark I heard someone cry. I began crying too. It was in that state of mind that I wrote the story "Ondu Haleya Chaddi" [A Pair of Old Shorts]. The next day, friends who had come to see me off saw it lying on the desk. Rajappa Dalavayi asked if he could take the story, and I said "yes". There was nothing unusual about that. Unlike today, we never thought of copyright, ownership and so on. Rajappa sent it to the *Prajavani* Deepavali competition and the story—which I had just scribbled off—won the first prize. I realized I had potential as a writer and began taking the work seriously. I then wrote "Bugari", and the year after that, "Batha" [Grain] and won the prize three years running. I had done quite a bit of reading in anthropology, sociology and psychology—and, of course, a great deal of Ambedkar, who is soul food for us dalits.'

P. Lankesh not only published 'Bugari' in his extremely popular littl emagazine *Lankesh Patrike*, he also assigned Mogalli Ganesh a book review column, 'Avalokana'. The column, and Mogalli, became known for the characteristically strong criticism and for introducing the trend of using social criteria, as against literary criteria, as the measure for literature. There were positive and negative responses to the

column. 'I enjoyed writing this column and consider this ashprushya mimamsa [evaluation of literature from an untouchable's point of view/dalit aesthetics] very important to my development as a writer. People have said that I was like a fire—destructive. But I replied: "I am willing to be the fire that you light your lamp with." I feel I have a split personality.'

After a long debate in the weekly, *Agni*—sparked off by a letter written by writer and critic U.R. Ananthamurthy's objection to Mogalli's critical approach—in which many key intellectuals participated, Mogalli began writing a column called 'Thakkararu'. He explains, 'I wanted to show, through an analysis of the great writers of Kannada literature, how caste and religion restricted our creativity and defined our notions of universality. I analysed the work of many important Kannada writers.' When the columns were to be published as a book, he asked Tejaswi [Purnachandra Tejaswi], whom he admired greatly, to write a foreword. 'Tejaswi agreed, but wanted me to go and spend a week with him first. I could not manage that and he passed away. I dedicated the book to him. I tried to meet Keertinath Kurtkoti when I was in Dharwad, but he did not want to see me. He was also quite frail and ill at the time. I asked Ananthamurthy to release the book, which he did. It won the Sahitya Akademi award for 2008.'

Ananthamurthy has also released Mogalli's newest collection of stories, *Kanemale*, in 2010. 'Speaking on the occasion, he said I was no longer a dalit writer. I was a mainstream writer, comparable to any other writer in the world. Struck by the observation, I looked back at those stories. It was true. Nowhere had I made reference to the dalit question. There were certainly some changes taking place in me. I thought: everyone in this country has a mirror into which he or she looks and sees things from a caste perspective. But those mirrors are just broken pieces. We do not see the face of humanity as a whole. The mirror I hold up is my mirror, but it is a mirror in which you can see others too, in which, I hope, we can see humanity.'

Among his books are three novels, *Thottilu* (Cradle, 2005), *Krithika* (2006) and *Anadi* (Eternal, or Without Origin, 2008), two collections of poetry, *Suryana Bachedubahude* (Can You Hide the Sun?, 2001) and *Deva Samshana* (Graveyard of the Gods, 2008), over a dozen short-story collections, best known among which are *Buguri* (Top, 1992), *Athe* (Aunt, or Mother-in-law, 1997), *Bhoomi* (Earth, 2005), *Mannu* (Soil, 2007). Other works include *Dalitharu Jagruthi* (Dalit Awakening, 1998), *Dalitha Kathana* (Dalit Narratives, 2005), *Moukhika Kathana* (Oral Narrative, 2006) and *Jeevajala Janapada* (Folklore of Regenerative Life, 2010). He has received over twenty awards for his writing.

'In the last twenty-five years, I have written around a hundred stories, but I feel I am yet to write *the* story, my *Old Man and the Sea*!'

The Top

Translated by M. Madhava Prasad

Cheluva's eyes filled with tears as he agonized over the loss of his top, which had fallen into the makeshift latrine pit. He stood on one leg, leaning on the wall of the veranda and wiped his eyes and face with the falling tears. He had so enjoyed twisting the string—which his grandfather had made for him from a piece of cloth torn from his grandmother's old sari—round and round the top, releasing it on the polished floor of the veranda and listening intently to its quiet snoring sound, tuning himself to its hum. But now that colourful green-white-and-saffron-striped top had fallen into the hellhole of the latrine pit, which had been made for a wedding. It was as if the falling top signalled his own tragedy, his father's lot in life, or the misfortune of the people of that house and the entire keri. Tiring of it after a while, Cheluva went to the backyard, climbed the honge tree, splashing green and heavily laden with flower buds like a thousand eyes, and sat on it. He could see the holekeri below, dirty and crumpled, like a rag full of holes. Sitting on a branch in silent meditation, he watched the tiny insects swarming around the honge flowers as if he was going to kiss them. Still, the top kept spinning incessantly in his head. He had to get it out of the pit somehow. He couldn't just keep buying new ones. In fact, he was fairly sure that he was never going to get a top like that again. Why does Father get into such a rage over my tops, he wondered sadly. All at once his attention was drawn to a pack of dogs racing around angrily and frenetically over the heaps of rubbish in the backyard and in and out of the thorn bushes. Their bow-wows were followed by a squeal. It was a pig, being chased by the dogs. Afraid that they would dig their teeth into its posterior any moment now and too scared to look back, the pig let out a loud squeal, kuyyoo!, dashed forward and fell with a thud right into that very same latrine pit.

'Oh,' cried Cheluva, not knowing what to do, 'the pig has fallen into the shit pit.' He climbed down from the tree, ran into the house and said to his mother, 'Avva, Avva, someone's pig has fallen into our latrine pit in the backyard!'

'Ha! Whose cursed pig is that, was it destined to die in our pit, couldn't find another place?' she asked and came out to see. Suddenly she felt weary and pained at the thought that her brute of a husband hadn't got round to filling up the latrine pit. 'Hey, Cheluva, your father might be in the tea shop, go bring him, let him somehow get it out of there,' she said, and then added, 'Don't you go tell anyone else now, take care, might turn into a fight.'

What a turn of events for my colourful top; it will be impossible now to fish it out, to wind the cord around it and let it go on the polished floor, he thought regretfully. He had hung on to a thread of hope that when nobody was at home he might be able to move the coconut fronds covering the pit aside and fish out the top with a hook. That hope now lay shattered. That pig would have jumped around in the shit swamp and removed all traces of the top by now; even if, by chance, someone were to find it while rescuing the pig, his father wasn't going to let him have it back. These thoughts running through his mind, he approached the tea shop and taking one look at the special way his father was posing as he sat at the counter, he went quietly to his grandfather Gunjarayya and told him the news of the pig fall.

Gunjarayya gave him a startled look and then, dropping batter into the pan he had been frying bondas in, asked, 'Is this for real or are you joking? How could it have fallen in there? Big one, or small?'

'Oh please, come quickly. If you keep sitting there it will be gone,' Cheluva said, thinking that if something was done soon, there might still be a chance of retrieving his top.

'Wait, I'll fry another round of bondas first,' Gunjarayya replied.

Annoyed, Cheluva returned to the backyard, sat in the shade of the honge tree, visualized the dying pig, tried to imagine what would happen behind his father's hard moustaches when he learnt about the pig, rued the fate of his top again and looked up at the sky.

*

Cheluva's grandfather Gunjarayya had to finish frying the bondas before going to the backyard. In his haste, he removed the half-cooked bondas from the pan, decided to fry another batch and kept thinking of the fallen pig as he speeded up his job, burning his fingers in the process. He remembered the occasion when Tippegowda's buffalo, which wandered loose, grazing all over the place, had fallen into the same latrine pit and what a massive effort it had taken to pull it out of there and the disgust he had felt then. Many a plan had been made to fill up that pit but his eldest son Chikkanna had not succeeded in doing so. Complaints about the pit were many. When Tippegowda's buffalo had fallen into it, a dozen men had had to tie a rope around it to pull it out like a massive rock; the whole process had made the pit twice as large as it was. Having been stuck in the pit for a whole day, the buffalo died soon after being pulled out. But mainly it was torture inflicted by the contraption that was devised to pull it out that had finished it off.

When Tippegowda demanded compensation, Chikkanna had turned on him like a rowdy and said, 'Gowdre, do you think we have trained the pit—that such and such

people's buffalo will come, sheep will come, pull them in? If your buffalo had any brains, why should it come to our yard? Fine fellow you are, we dug a latrine pit for our convenience, your buffalo came and fell into it and died. How are we responsible?'

No compensation, no nothing, he had snarled and sent Tippegowda off. Since then, this shit pit has acquired its own illustrious history. The villagers had demanded that the pit be covered with a metal sheet or a stone slab, but to no avail. Since the buffalo's fall, the pit had become bigger, the sides had collapsed. Chikkanna couldn't afford big enough sheets or stone slabs to cover it. He had covered it with the more easily available fronds of the coconut palm. This had led to a growing number of comic and tragic incidents.

*

Yalakkayya of the madigas had come to inspect the dead buffalo. He got it washed thoroughly with hot water, cut it up and took away a basketful of meat. Tippegowda heard about it and exploded. Those madiga bastards have deliberately pushed the buffalo into the pit, he said to the villagers. But shares of the buffalo meat had reached many of the villagers, so nobody paid too much attention.

Soon some city-educated youngsters began to joke that the latrine pit was a kheda operation to trap buffaloes, but still Chikkanna was unmoved. Recalling all this as he fried the bondas, the pan itself started to look to Gunjarayya's eyes like a latrine pit and he retched.

'Thuth,' he swore, 'this mother-fucking oil's bad, the bondas are still uncooked.' He raised the flame until the bondas were done, reported the matter discreetly to his son Chikkanna and rushed to the backyard.

Cheluva thought of telling his grandfather about the top, decided against it and said, 'Now how are we ever going to get this pig out of the pit?'

Gunjarayya moved the palm fronds aside gently and looked inside. The pig started to jump up, fell in again and squealed. A bean-sized lump of shit landed on Gunjarayya's nose and sat there like a fly. The mild-mannered Gunjarayya was furious, felt humiliated by this.

'Fuck it, let it die in there,' he cursed and, comparing his lot to that of Dharmaraya who, during the ascent to heaven, had dipped his little finger in hell, he wiped his nose with a leaf and, deciding that it was best to leave the whole business to his son, returned to the tea shop.

Losing hope of ever retrieving his top, Cheluva absent-mindedly wound the top string tightly round his fingers and let drop some big tears. The pig, the shit pit, the whole village and its goings-on seemed to him like some episode in the story of the

Varahaavatara, the boar avatar of Vishnu, told by the harikatha dasas. Cheluva was filled with fear and trepidation. The pig had ensured that no traces of his top were left. The pleasure of having onlookers admire and envy the beauty of his top as it spun on the cemented floor was now lost forever and Cheluva was angry with his father.

'Why doesn't he die, the wretch, he has done this to all my tops. That day he chopped up three tops with an axe and threw them in the fire. Another one he threw away. And today he shouted, "Which top is that you are playing with, bring it here, son of a whore," and grabbing the top, he threw it into the pit, shouting, "If I see a top in your hand again, I'll slice you up."' He climbed up the honge tree again and looking at the pit, began to think. He remembered all those occasions when somebody's chicken and someone else's sheep had fallen into the pit and died, leading to quarrels and how his father would leap about fiercely and threaten the complainants with a knife. The spinning top began to swirl around his head, his entire body, joined soon by a jumble of images of the whole house.

The latrine pit Chikkanna had built in the backyard was the first of its kind in the whole village. It had introduced a new system into the village. When his brother Shantaraja married a girl from Mysore, he had built the latrine for the relatives from the city, especially women who might otherwise have had a hard time. But this set-up had been nothing but trouble from day one. The pit had filled up with the droppings of all the women who had partaken of the grand wedding feast. The cubicle was built in modern style, but instead of a drainage system, a pit had been dug about a man-and-a-half deep to collect the shit. The day after the wedding, it was already full and the whole house began to stink, testing everybody's patience. In the middle of all the commotion, someone from the bride's side, hatching a plan to get some woman to sleep with him, had taken her to the backyard. He slipped and fell into the pit and emerged with his leg soaked in watery shit and everyone had been greatly entertained.

He then proceeded to declare: 'I told my fatherinla a thousand times, Rangappa, don't give your daughter to some miserable village like this. But that wretched fellow of a fatherinla didn't listen to me. Some demon dragged me to the latrine pit and tried to push me in. Baichaans I escaped and ran away. Thu! Thu! What a horrible smell. Who knows what these village people eat! Should never have given the girl to this demon-and-ghost-ridden house …' and so on he went, abusing the groom's family to cover up his humiliation.

By then Athari, the drinking champion of the entire village, arrived and tried to start a fist fight with the abusive guest and the groom had to intervene to put an end to the quarrel.

This latrine pit had seen dozens of such incidents and Gunjarayya mulled over them, turning the pages of the holekeri's history in his head. Meanwhile, Chikkanna, on

hearing of the fallen pig, had thought of it as an unexpected gift from heaven and had begun making plans. The women of the house began to suspect that some disaster was imminent.

Cheluva's mother got inexplicably worried and began to call out his name. She too remembered the story narrated by the harikatha dasa. 'O my God, didn't he say that the lord had taken the form of a pig to kill a rakshasa? Didn't it kill the rakshasa who was hiding in the latrine?' she recollected indistinctly. 'Cheluva, hey Cheluva, come here, where are you?' she cried loudly.

Why was she shouting like this suddenly, wondered Cheluva, as he went in and asked her what the matter was. The smell from the latrine pit was wafting in through the back door and slowly filling up the house. He pinched his nose.

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The sad part was that there was no hope left of Cheluva retrieving his top. 'Don't go near the pit. Take your slate and go sit down in the veranda and write. Where does it say you shouldn't study during holidays?'

His mother was busy making foodstuff for the tea shop. Cheluva went out to the street and wondered: 'How is father going to drag the pig out? What will he do if he finds the top while he's at it?' He couldn't figure it out. He put on a sad face and muttered to himself, 'What's it to him if I play with the top?' To his mind, his father seemed like the biggest rakshasa. Then he saw his mother, his grandmother, his aunts and their pale and distraught faces made him think that they were suffering from some terrible disease. Ignoring his mother's orders, he went to the tea shop. He saw Athari, who was like a permanent customer, with his father. By the time his curiosity brought him there, discussion of the ways and means to extract the pig had made much progress. According to the blueprint prepared by Chikkanna and Athari, the idea was to steal the pig. But it was difficult, even impossible, to kill the pig while it was in the pit. Pigs were not the kind of animals to give up their lives cheaply. If they tried to spear it down there, it would make such a racket that the owner would soon be alerted and the entire plan would go bust. Finally, they came to the following conclusions.

The pig should be left in the pit until nightfall. After it tired of struggling and was near death with exhaustion, it should be speared, and if it still didn't die, they would climb into the pit, tie a rope around it and pull it out. Hearing the last stage of the plan, Cheluva tried to imagine the scene of the pig dying with his top somewhere in the vicinity. He couldn't understand why they wanted to kill it. When his grandfather said he didn't like the plan, he thought his grandfather was right. Meanwhile, in the tea shop, customers came and went, they ate bondas and slurped tea. They talked about this and

that and cursed the heat. The rains would fail again, they said in despair. And they all said, 'Thu! Chikkanna, what is this stench? Has a dog died in your backyard? It is the smell of shit. Can't even drink tea!' And so on. And having discussed all these routine matters, they went away, back to work. The sun was beginning to go down.

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Athari had got everything ready as per the blueprint. He had brought a pot full of liquor and kept it in the backyard. They had figured that it was best to get solidly drunk before beginning the job. Only in such a state could you bear the stench long enough to get the pig out of the hole, Athari had argued to Chikkanna's wholehearted approval. Everything was ready. The women of the house had expressed their disapproval of this scheme but their voices lacked mike support. The job should be done quickly and quietly, the two men decided, and started to drink. Cheluva watched from a side without being seen, wondering how they were going to go into the pit; he was still holding on to a thread of hope that the top might turn up. Chikkanna gulped down a round, went and peered into the pit. Starting violently at the stench that greeted his nose, he came running back to start drinking again. The stench was wandering about, like the stench of the entire village, the stench of humanity, of the path it had travelled.

Athari was smashed. He stammered. 'It's been lying there struggling since morning and is now close to death. Now we can wring its neck and kill it.'

'That's not going to work, Athari. Pigs don't give up life that easily. Forget about wringing its neck,' said Chikkanna.

'You are right too, brother. So let's do this. Let's get it into a sack and pull it out with a rope.'

'Very good, Athari,' agreed Chikkanna.

Cheluva, watching all this, felt sad—he knew his father would throw away the top even if he found it. He felt as if he had lost a dear friend.

*

Athari gently moved the coconut palm fronds aside. The stench smacked his nose. With their drink-hazy eyes they searched for the pig in the hole. 'Where is it gone, Anna, I can't see it,' said Athari.

'Hey, look closely, it's lying there covered in shit,' said Chikkanna.

'Oh yes, brother, it's rolled around in the shit so much, you can barely recognize it.'

Braving the unbearable smell, they looked. They decided that one of them would have to go in. Gathering his courage, Cheluva bent over and took a peek. He could see

nothing.

Chikkanna got angry. ‘What are you looking at? Go stand to aside and tell me if someone’s watching,’ he said, assigning him guard duty. Cheluva agreed and felt encouraged. Let them look for the pig and I’ll look for my top, he decided, and went and stood at some distance, the humming top on his mind. The pig, its body caked with shit, was lying there like Vishnu’s varaha avatar. Whether it was the pig’s misfortune or Athari’s, it had exhausted itself and was close to death, making their task that much easier. Still, someone had to climb in and Chikkanna decided to go himself. Thinking that the bottom of the pit would be higher, having become wider with the buffalo episode, he misjudged the depth. He placed his foot expecting solid ground and lost his balance, and weak from drink, slipped and fell just like the pig and, right in front of its grotesquely distorted face, soaked up to his waist in shit. The pig made some feeble noises and tried to open its eyes but they too were caked with filth.

Athari, seeing Chikkanna’s plight, began to laugh saying, ‘Why, Anna, you too have gone and fallen in like the pig.’

Chikkanna was furious but he knew he had a job to do and it would do no good to get worked up. ‘You bastard, pass me the sack, you can laugh later,’ he said.

Athari hastily handed him the sack and, still laughing, said, ‘Here, take the rope also.’

Watching this horrific scene, Cheluva felt like vomiting and soon became subdued by confusion. In that impossible stench and anger and humiliation, Chikkanna threw up all that he had drunk, became quite sober and started to feel angry. The pig was identified as belonging to Kuntanna. Meanwhile, Cheluva went and informed his grandfather of his father’s plight.

An angry Gunjarayya came out and started abusing them. ‘Did I ask you to do this? I said stay on top and put a rope round its neck with a hook and pull it up. Thu, Rama Rama—what crimes have you committed, you sinners? Who goes and falls into a shit pit and gets soaked in it? You have fallen in hell, right in front of my eyes. What can you do, it’s your karma.’

Chikkanna had meanwhile covered the pig with the sack and tied the rope and was rolling his eyes. Gunjarayya was dejected. ‘Ours is a priestly family, did it have to sink to this level; they have destroyed the purity of the family, everything’s mixed up, shit, booze and piss. This household has become unworthy of the village temple priesthood,’ he thought with pain. When Chikkanna tightened the rope and gave the signal, Athari pulled it up.

Then Athari said, ‘Now you come up. Hold on to the rope tightly, okay? Or you will go in again, head first,’ and laughed.

Chikkanna was by now stone-cold sober. Feeling humiliated, he came up and looked at the filthy water dripping from his body, waist down. He turned angrily to his father. 'What did you say? You saw me fall in hell with your eyes, it's my karma, isn't that what you said? Now see who is going to be in hell.'

He rushed towards his father, full of anger and all kinds of resentments piled up over time.

'Go away, don't touch me, don't defile me,' Gunjarayya pleaded.

But Chikkanna held the old man by the neck and shook him, shouting, 'I'll throw you into hell, you bastard.'

Cheluva didn't want the top any more. He felt like crying.

Athari assessed the situation and feared that their game would be exposed. 'Brother, let it be now, poor fellow, why fight with an old man. Let go. After all, he only said it to his own son. Let go, let go,' he said as he grabbed Chikkanna by his shoulders and dragged him to one side.

Chikkanna felt as if he had fractured a leg, thanks to Athari's violent move.

'Hey, Athari,' he said, 'you pushed me! And earlier, when I fell inside, you laughed. And now you are taking his side.'

Ignoring his anger, Athari kept pulling Chikkanna, saying, 'Come this way, brother, we have work to do.'

Godforsaken, all three of them, were still standing by the pit.

Athari, in a bid to end the fight, held on to Chikkanna's waist tightly. 'Ai, don't get my anger up now, come on,' and pulled hard.

'Let go, son of a whore,' said Chikkana and pushed hard and freed himself from Athari's grip.

The latter, in his drunken state, lost his balance and with nothing to stop his fall, with no help forthcoming, fell easily into that very same latrine pit, just like the pig. The worst of it was that, having fallen flat, he was soaked in shit from head to toe. In great anger, he got up and started to scramble up.

This sudden turn of events did make Cheluva laugh but he feared things were moving into another dimension altogether and stepped away. The women, determined not to witness this hellish scene, had retreated inside and shut the doors and windows. Father and son now stopped fighting and pulled Athari out of the pit. Athari emerged grimly, looked at both of them and quietly washed himself with water from the big pot.

'Aha, Chikkannappa, sir, I should thrash myself with a chappal for making friends with you. You pushed me into the pit for no reason, what injustice. If by chance my head had got stuck inside, what would you have done? Thu! Whoreson, let it be for now but I

am not one to let go so easily. Anyway, a big farewell salute to your great friendship,' he said and left.

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The news spread in the village. Athari gave the incident his own spin, claiming that father and son had joined forces to humiliate him. He made arrangements for justice to be done that very night. Since Chikkanna's latrine pit had been the cause of many disasters in the past, the villagers, angered by the latest incident involving Athari, readily came out, all set to deliver judgment.

Meanwhile, the big plan to wash the pig in hot water, cut it up and sell the meat in the Sadaralli shandy the next day and share the earnings had collapsed. With the smell of the shit, the humiliation of Athari, the petty jealousies of the village and the hidden tragedies, the whole thing had become one big joke. Cheluva delighted in this turn of events, he figured that if after the trial the pit were to be filled up, his father would not be able to throw another top into it again. Evening came and everybody was called to the village court. Chikkanna had not yet arrived. The youngsters in the village were having fun with this funny complaint. Chikkanna's father, Gunjarayya, had figured that it would be best to admit his son's wrongdoing and pay the penalty.

At the end of the discussion, Yajaman Kadubayya spoke up, 'It was wrong on your son's part to push Athari into the shit pit. And then, it seems that you deliberately pushed the pig into the pit and were planning to sell it in Sadaralli shandy. Athari is saying so himself. Besides, having climbed into the pit and rolled around in the shit, your son has served us snacks and tea. All this is not right. Anyway, you know everything. Pay 301 rupees penalty and admit your guilt. Athari wants to do some puja to cleanse himself: give him another hundred for that.' The verdict had been given.

Chikkanna, who had been listening to all this from a spot near the seat of justice, came forward and said, 'Why should we pay penalty? Who pushed whom into the latrine pit? Careful what you say! Athari is not an innocent baby to fall in with just one little push. Why should I push him? Did I have any grudge against him, did I owe him anything, did he owe me something …? What did you think? You would create a dispute between us, talk a lot of gas, get some penalty money and have a free drink? Appa, come let's go. What penalty? I am not going to give them a single paisa.'

He made a ruckus until blows were exchanged and the trial came to an end. Chikkanna dragged his father and returned home.

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Cheluva couldn't sleep, he kept thinking that his father was a big demon. A cool breeze was blowing outside, but inside, the house was filled with the warm smelly air. Cheluva felt bad for the helpless Kuntanna. He had no relatives and no one to support him either, because he had come from elsewhere and settled here. He felt bad that poor Kuntanna had to suffer injustice at the hands of his own father. Just like Tippegowda's buffalo, the pig had also died soon after being pulled out of the pit, having fought with death the whole day. And it was not possible to chop it up and sell it, as was the plan. It lay near the pit, thousands of flies covering the body. Thinking of all this, as he lay in bed, Cheluva felt scared that the pig might come back as a ghost and tried to imagine the pig's ghost in human form. An image formed in his mind: that of the pig with a golden top in one hand and a knife in the other, quietly standing by his father's side and doing something. Cheluva woke up with a start, turned and hugged his grandmother. The stench hit his nose. His grandmother had gone to sleep, resigning herself to the smell. The pig's human-looking ghost seemed to be dancing around all over the house and, assuming a form identical to his father's, was boring holes in the sleeping heads with the knife and top and pouring shit into them. He saw the ghost making a hole in the rooftop of every house in the village and pouring shit inside and bellowing and laughing.

Thinking that it was approaching him, Cheluva moaned, 'Grandma, Grandma, I have to pee, get up.'

The whole house was still and wrapped in darkness. He couldn't see anything in the dark and began to sob, wondering if the top was the cause of all this. He closed his eyes even tighter out of fear. He heard the harsh snoring of his father. In the backyard, a crow's sleepy cry and loud, flapping wings sliced through the darkness. He thought the pig had assumed the form of a crow and was setting out to fly around the village. Little by little, he peed into his grandmother's saree and waited for sleep. All over the dark house, he heard loud footsteps and saw a moving shadow just like his father's. 'No one is crueller than my father in the entire village,' he thought.

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Chikkanna himself couldn't figure out why all this had happened, what was behind it all. A worried Gunjarayya had got up early and was smoking a beedi. Recalling something he had overheard at the trial about a police complaint, he feared for the future. Cheluva got up and went to the backyard to pee and took a look at the pig's carcass.

He came back and told his grandfather, 'Appo, dogs are eating the pig in the backyard.'

'Ayyo, thu, damn you, what kind of news have you brought early in the morning!' he cursed and, getting up, went and shooed away the dogs. All this is the fault of

Chikkanna, he thought as he looked at the pig with its bloated belly. 'Don't, don't, I told him, better get the pit filled. But he never listened to me … pigs fell, sheep fell, chicken, dogs, buffalo, all sorts of things fell inside. Oh, I thought hell was somewhere far away, but it is right here, in my own house,' he sighed.

Helpless before his son, Gunjarayya's wits had dried up. His usual gentleness gave way to anger. 'Who is there to save us from this hell? The whole world goes one way and this village goes another way. How could anyone go to such lengths to eat a pig fallen into shit and make a few paise? Thu, thu, hell, hell, how could God keep pushing us into it and sit there watching?' he thought to himself, feeling hopelessly trapped in a sea of problems.

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That same night, the villagers had decided to boycott Chikkanna's tea shop. 'He fell into a shit hole. We shouldn't let him touch us, or eat anything served by him. We shouldn't give him anything either,' they resolved. And further that, since he had become polluted, he should be kept away from priestly duties, should not be allowed to take part in any religious activities, that the entire household should be likewise kept out of all activities, and so on. In addition, they had gone to the Akkur police station and submitted a complaint endorsed by Tippegowda. The latrine pit had become a big nuisance, a source of humiliation for the entire village. In the middle of all these complications, Cheluva continued to recollect the top's beauty, the way it spun, but he had by now lost all hope of its recovery. The grotesque vision of the pig kept coming back to him. The latrine pit became a weird sort of cultural problem for the village. The pit knew many secrets. There were cases of newborns from illicit liaisons being thrown into it. The villagers did not know about these. The smell from the bloated pig's carcass kept spreading as the wind blew, ruining the beauty of the dawn that was breaking.

Sick of the smell, the villagers were itching to start a fight with Chikkanna. Dogs were fighting over the pig. The women found out about the boycott when they went to fetch water and came back crying, complaining that they were being punished for the men's wrongdoings. Cheluva came and sat in the veranda, oblivious to all the goings-on. The top seemed to be spinning on the floor, taunting him. Time went by. Chikkanna and Athari had been taken away by the Akkur police with Tippegowda's help. Tippegowda had no particular grouse against Athari but the memory of his dead buffalo, which the untouchables had feasted on, still smarted, so he had agreed to be a party to the complaint. No one had returned from the police station yet.

Many complaints had been filed at the police station, demanding that the pit be filled, that the entire village was being corrupted by Chikkanna, that animals were being pushed into the pit and the meat being sold, that Chikkanna should compensate the

villagers who had lost their cattle, and so on. The police station had never before seen such a bizarre case. The inspector laughed a lot and asked some questions. He sent everybody back to the village, promising to solve the case soon. Chikkanna tried, in spite of all this, to defend his pit, but everybody believed that he was solely to blame for the troubles caused by it and so had left Gunjarayya out of the complaint.

The inspector asked Athari, laughing, 'Tell me, is this person called Chikkanna the one who pushed you in?'

'Yes sir,' said Athari in reply.

'How did you fall?'

Athari stood quietly, frowning.

'Hey, speak up, I am asking you,' the inspector said angrily.

'I fell face-down.'

'Does that mean you were fully immersed in it?' the inspector asked and laughed out loud.

All the policemen present joined in the laughter. Later the same questions were thrown at Chikkanna.

'Did you also swim in the shit?'

Chikkanna nodded a yes and kept his head bowed.

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After all that inquiry, the inspector cleared his throat and in a serious voice, said to them, 'Look fellows, both of you have anyway fallen into the latrine pit and defiled yourself. Even though Chikkanna is at fault, Athari is not entirely without fault. We can deal with that later. For now, since you are defiled by shit anyway, we have a similar problem in the police station. Being a rural police station, it doesn't have a proper drainage system like city stations. We also have a latrine pit, same as Chikkanna's. And it is full. The two of you go empty it. We can't use the damn thing any more.' And then he added a threat: 'If you don't do it, I'll make sure you spend at least six months each in jail.'

Chikkanna and Athari's faces showed regret at having got themselves into such a situation.

'Can't do it, sir. One fall into hell is more than enough. I am not going to get in there again and remove myself further from my God,' Athari moaned.

The inspector, angrily swirling his ruler, said, 'Whoresons, eaters of shit, you dare talk back to me? Wasn't it your job in the past to carry shit? So now you think you've

gone up in life? Loafer bastards, if you don't do as I say, I'll prepare a charge sheet and have you sent to central jail to die there. I'll make you clean the shit of many countries. Here there is just a little bit. In central jail, I'll see that you clean the pits all day and eat it too.'

Subdued by this threat, the two of them climbed into the pit. Without a word, without looking at each other, without any blueprints, they took the pickaxe and basket and emptied out the latrine pit and stood there sweating.

The inspector was pleased and, laughing inwardly at their plight, gave them some advice and sent them home. Athari and Chikkanna took different routes back home, feeling helpless, dishonoured, uneasy. Chikkanna, anger pouring out of every hair on his body, distressed, pained and humiliated, stopped at an arrack shop on the way and started to drink. He tried to forget but everything kept drumming incessantly in his head. He was boiling inside, unable to make sense of the day's events. The evening darkness was thickening. As he approached the house, the smells of the latrine pit and the dead pig pierced his nose. Cheluva, startled at the sight of his father's grim visage, put aside his books and curled up in a corner. Adding to the hurt and anger caused by the day's events, Chikkanna was haunted by thoughts of the villagers' boycott and Tippegowda's complaint.

He grabbed Cheluva by his shoulders and shouted, 'Where is that bastard, your grandfather, the one who calls himself my father, go call him.'

Cheluva peed in his pants and remembered that he had peed in his grandmother's saree the previous night. 'I don't know where he has gone,' he said and started crying.

In ferocious anger, Chikkanna shouted, 'I'll fuck his wife, I won't let him go without breaking his limbs.'

Cheluva's mother, who was busy mixing ragi flour, emerged from the kitchen and was rattled by her husband's fierce appearance. She held her legs together to stop them from shivering. 'Ayyo Rama, what can we do if the villagers all get together and do such a thing, I beg you, be quiet. They have all talked it over. Don't start a fight, nobody is even going to come and try to stop it,' she pleaded with him.

He dismissed this plea with a wave of his hand. 'You whore, get back inside now,' he said as he pushed her.

She didn't give up and tried to hold his feet.

'Fuck your mother, aye, are you trying to give me advice?' He pushed her again and hammered her back with his fist.

Cheluva ran out onto the street crying loudly and shouted, 'Come quickly, my father is going to kill my mother.'

Nobody had any sympathy left for Chikkanna. Nobody came forward to intervene. Chikkanna was screaming dreadfully and abusing all and sundry, as he looked around for a stick. When he went in to fetch a rod from the kitchen, Cheluva's mother ran out of the back door. Frustrated, he kept up his abuses against the entire village like a demented fellow and broke the water pot with the stick. The water flowed. He then smashed all the pots arranged in a row. The pot with the flour was on the stove, boiling. The smell of the flour spread. Pots broke and rolled around. Pulses, ragi, jowar, rice, paddy, little packets wrapped in cloth were all scattered on the floor under Chikkanna's crushing feet. Nobody in the keri raised a voice. Fearful, Cheluva stood in the street, whimpering, wondering where his mother had gone. Gunjarayya, perhaps having sensed trouble, had disappeared. Once a tiger in the village, Chikkanna still smarted from the laughter of the young boys at the trial. He hurled abuses randomly into the air. The villagers were sitting on their verandas, waiting to pounce on Chikkanna if he should say anything directly or indirectly about any of them. Perhaps his wife's words had alerted him to this possibility, so Chikkanna avoided reference to the villagers and took out all his anger on the pots that had been in the house for generations. They were like the heads of generations past and present, children, innocents, women and they lay shattered on the floor along with the scattered grain. The sounds of the breaking pots and of the shards bouncing off the floor and the walls were like the cries of helpless scapegoats. The grains of ragi seemed to hide under the potsherds, startled by his fierce appearance. Unable to go anywhere in the darkness, Cheluva too quaked at the sight of his father's frightful form.

Chikkanna danced around fiercely. 'Come, you whoresons, I'll fuck your wives,' he shouted and with the stick he attacked a large pot that had survived the rout. With a loud thud, as if the very house's last breath had been snuffed out, it cracked open and spilt its contents—seed ragi—on the floor. Cheluva, watching from a window, was astonished. The top! Mother had hidden it there! He stared wide-eyed at the top lying on the floor. Cheluva had, a long time ago, given one of his tops to his mother to hide, to keep it safe from his father. His mother had forgotten about it. It toppled out of the large pot along with the ragi. Even as Cheluva feared for this top, he saw Chikkanna rush into the kitchen, where he saw the pot with the ragi flour steaming and, cursing his wife and the whole house, took the pot, ran out and threw it into the latrine pit.

Running out onto the street, Chikkanna shouted, 'Whoresons, come on, I'll fuck all your wives.' He screamed and jumped and thundered like a madman.

Cheluva came out of the small room, picked up the top, slunk out of the back door, stood in the darkness and, with great anger, threw it farther than his father could have thrown it and with a sob stood there quietly. From a corner of the dark yard, his mother

called out to him sobbing. Cheluva went towards her, touched her cheeks soaked in hot tears.

'Don't cry Mother,' he said tearfully and hugged her and they sat there, tightly holding each other.

From the street, Chikkanna's thundering voice reverberated and it seemed as if Chikkanna had got into a fight with someone. The filth of the entire holekeri, the latrine pit, the dead pig, the top, the police station, all those animals that fell and died, one by one they appeared to Cheluva, and the pig in human form that had haunted him at night seemed once again to be boring a hole in everybody's skulls and pouring shit into it.

In the darkness, he held tightly onto his mother's little finger. 'Mother, take me into your belly,' he said.

Cheluva's mother sat there, crying. The holekeri street reverberated with high-pitched noise.

My Grandfather Had a Wish

Translated by Manu S. Shetty

When our grandfather was still around, all of us little boys of the family were forever jumping around in that old house, making up and playing all sorts of games, rising and falling in a riot of brawls and, at the end of it, when we made our appearance in the keri, they swore: 'The damned pack of crows has arrived!' But those words did not touch us. We had ears only for Grandfather. Grandfather seemed like a storyteller from some fabled land and we couldn't bear to spend a single night away from him. We'd drift away on the wings of his tales to an enchanted world. Grandfather never ever raised his hand to any one of us.

Ours was a joint family household. Every member of that household had set their lives on a path that led irredeemably to doom. Seven uncles and their wives, father's sisters, various relatives from generations ago, and also two of our grandfather's sisters, their husbands and their children filled that house and lay about in it like sheep. Even as we breathed the smells of all the things piled up in that dingy house, we spent the nights floating in the dreamy world of grandfather's stories—until morning broke. Daytime felt like hell, the schoolmaster's bamboo cane filling us with rage and defiance, leading some to mischief and coarse behaviour.

Grandfather dreamt of the day when all of us boys would have read all that there is to be read and become big officers who would go around suited and booted like Ambedkar.

'So many boys from one house! They occupy half the school! You'd think this school's being run for one household!' our schoolmaster would exclaim, as he fell on us with fierce blows.

We did not learn much at school. Back home, at sundown, we randomly mumbled to ourselves the half-remembered words, sentences, letters we had heard there. And at the end of the day's home studies, we sang 'The Song of the Cow' in chorus and tears would well up in the eyes of the women of the house. When we found that the song made them cry, we made it a point to sing it every night—and invariably ended up in tears ourselves. After that, the smell of ragi mudde cooking would make its way to us from the kitchen and hold us hostage. Everyone knew that only the ragi mudde had the power to rein us in.

At mealtime, for a few moments, the entire house fell into a silence like that of some grim ritual. The moment everybody sat down to eat, Grandfather would bring out a large platter from inside the house, place it before us as if it were some sacred object, touch it and bow low, muttering something. At those times, holding down the pangs of hunger and unmindful of my drooling mouth, I'd keep my eyes focused on Grandfather's face, my attention unwavering. The people in the house not only held the platter in great respect, they also feared it. We boys were afraid to touch it. Each day, day after day, Grandfather made one of us sit beside him by turns and fed the chosen one from the platter. The household would be engrossed in eating, everyone partaking of the food as if their deepest, unfulfilled dreams had been transmuted into the morsels in their hand. If anyone spoke, it felt as if the sanctity of that great platter had somehow been defiled.

The platter played an important role in our whole locality. No ceremonial occasion ever took place without it. It had to be present at every wedding, birth, death and alliance, and at all negotiations and adjudications. Without that platter, it was as if there was no moral order. Being the eldest son of my grandfather's firstborn son and also the oldest amongst the boys, I thought it my duty to try and grasp, however feebly, the meaning of the platter. It was said to have been handed down by our ancestors and there were a number of stories about how it came into their possession. The platter was large and shone brightly. On it was inscribed the figure of a dancing girl; flowers showered down on her from above as if on the wings of a gentle breeze. There were drawings of the sun and the moon, and the grim visage of some unknown person adorned the rear. There were other designs, strange beyond my knowing and when I tried to unravel them, my mind would drift away in other directions. It seems somebody had given the platter to my grandfather's mother. With each passing day it acquired new form, became a

cultural artefact, an emotional bond, the collective consciousness of the entire keri, the embodiment of all truth. Grandfather had told us that only if each one of us ate from that platter would we attain goodness, knowledge and a bright future.

There was a special place in the house where the platter was kept. Grandfather believed that if someone impure ate from the platter the entire family would be destroyed. For him the platter was everything.

My father alone was totally opposed to all this. He didn't show any particular regard for the platter and treated it like a piece of junk. His head was full of all kinds of strange notions.

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We were growing up in the midst of all this. One night, as usual, we started to pester our grandfather for a story. For some reason, he seemed reluctant that night. In that large house, where all of us lay down in groups, Grandfather used to tell stories that pleased everyone, also taking care not to offend my father.

I would say, 'Grandpa … grandpa … on thaaat day … you were telling the story of the king riding through the sky on a flying horse … forgets the spell that will bring it down and got lost not knowing what to do … Tell us that story!'

'No, not that one! We've heard that. Let him tell us another one!' the rest of the boys shot in.

We were insistent. Though we felt a little afraid when we saw Father, who was lying alongside Mother, light a beedi, we were emboldened by the fact that Grandfather was there. Of late, Father had taken a dislike for these stories. It was impossible for us to ask our mother to tell us stories. She spent the whole day burning like a flame in front of the stove, looking after the needs of the large household and was then never available to us after meals. I had no hope that my desire to lie warm beside her would ever be fulfilled. Grandfather played the all-in-one role of a father, mother, grandmother to us. The darkness of the new moon night filled the house. We continued to press grandpa for a story.

At last he opened up: 'What stories can I tell? I've told all that is to be told and there is nothing left to tell. The only possibility is that we take birth all over again, make up stories and then tell them!'

'That's right! Tell one like that,' I chimed in.

In the deep silence of that darkness, everyone pricked up their ears and prepared to gallop away on a fantasy horse.

‘They say there was this village. In that village, they say there lived this man who went through life suffering all there is to suffer in this world and managing to survive somehow or the other. They say he had a house full of children and grandchildren. But they say he had one fault in him. He saw one family member after another die around him but was cursed never to die himself. Wonder whether that curse has struck this house too …’

‘Shut up and go to sleep. What sort of fuckin’ stories are you listening to? This man is sick. Spoils these kids, filling their heads with all kinds of shit. Believes he can’t die. I don’t see why he can’t. Can’t he go and hang himself from some tree and die? Shut up and lie down,’ Father thundered.

We were too scared to sleep. If at mealtime it had seemed like dreams were crowding the plate like some ancient ritual; on nights like these, I felt as if I was performing a death ritual inside this house.

Grandfather had lost his hold over his own children. Our uncles went their own way. No one knew how the money they earned disappeared. If one of them was crazy about women, the other was struck by movie madness and spent all his time in town, making an appearance at home only in time for meals. Another was lost in the world of petty thefts and yet another slouched around the house muttering to himself in a corner. As for my father, he gathered all the pain and love of the entire household into his hands like a pack of cards and sat brooding all the time. Our aunts went out for work and brought home something, so we could all eat. But the sole responsibility of maintaining that large household fell on our grandfather. What energy he had even at that age! He’d load up the bicycle with bunches of tender coconuts, pushing it up and down the hilly roads all the way to town, sell them there and return home at sundown with something for us to eat. We boys always got our share of puffed rice and nuts. This was the only snack we knew and, if anything else was given, we wouldn’t admit that it tasted good. Grandfather had no faith in his sons’ ability to earn a living. He was ruled by the strange conviction that he had to feed the entire household till his dying day. As a result, whatever his sons earned was reserved for the satisfaction of their individual whims.

That huge household boasted of only one plastic comb, which ran through the hair of a hundred heads, day after day and was so smeared with grime that it was impossible to use; yet, not one of our aunts had the courage to ask her husband to buy a new one. Their experience had taught them that no wish was easily fulfilled in this household. Even we, the boys, knew it.

As he lay dying, my seven-year-old younger brother had asked my father—grandfather was away somewhere—‘Appa, appooo … will you get me … get me a kite?’

Father let out a weird laugh and said, ‘What would someone in your condition do with a kite?’

My brother died moments later.

Every desire in that house was doomed to disappointment even before it took full shape. When, every now and then, our aunts—ones that had got married but were sent back by their husbands, those that had been widowed and returned home, and ones that were never married—wept, I too wept with them. For some reason, they would confide their tales of woe to me. The entire house was like a separate social unit full of its own internal complexities.

At night, my spinster aunts made me lie beside them and in stolen moments said, ‘Drink, drink milk … Ahh … bite gently!’ Sometimes they’d tell me the story of the prince and the princess, saying, ‘They say then the princess hugged the prince and kissed him and he kissed her too … you know how … kiss me … Ahh … that’s how he kissed her,’ and fondle me. The spinster aunts always slept in a small room. They couldn’t look at anyone with affection. My father and uncles were very stern with their sisters. If the word ever got to them that one of the women was seen talking to a man, they whipped her till welts rose in her back. The women in the house were worn out. All joy had gone out of their lives. Often they lay down in a corner as if they were sick, pretending that they had their periods.

In the midst of all this, for some inexplicable reason, we boys behaved in a beastly manner towards one of our aunts. She had a mental problem and her strange ways had earned her the title of village madwoman. She circled our yard, staring at the bushes, plants and trees, selecting flowers and making garlands out of them before she tore them up and threw the shreds at the sky with a terrifying scream. It was for moments like this that we waited: we’d surround her like a pack of hunters, wielding sticks and yell and shout as if she were an animal till she cowered in fear, and then beat her up. It was such a joy to see her terror-stricken face. While we were still revelling in our pleasure, she’d stop crying and sing ‘The jasmine tree doesn’t give shade, oh daughters …,’ for a long while and fall asleep right there. And after we made sure that she was asleep, we poured water in her ears and shoved sticks and bits of straw into her nose to torment her even more. She bore all this in silence, never retaliating. She’d go without food for several days and then one day sneak into someone’s garden somewhere, steal fruits and eat as much as she could, share the rest with us and try to talk to us. In fact, it was one of our uncles who prodded us to harass her. This uncle looked retarded and had a strange, distorted mind. If no one was around, when our aunt lay unconscious, he looked at her half-naked body as if to devour it. He’d fall on her on the pretext of punishing her for some imaginary misdeed and squeeze her full breasts and molest her. She suffered everything in silence. After a time, watching the violence that was being ceaselessly

inflicted on her, I sickened of it and stopped participating. I even began to pity her. I don't know whether Grandfather knew about all this or not; if he did, he kept quiet about it. Father never once raised his hand at our mad aunt.

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This is what happened one day: crazy-aunt had as usual made a long garland of flowers, but, for once, instead of tearing it up, she wrapped it around her head and neck and sat leaning against a tree, staring at the sky with her eyes wide open—dead. While everyone else stood around, looking on curiously, saying that the mad woman was dead, Grandfather, visibly pained, brought out the platter, lit incense on it, waved it around her corpse and bowed to it saying, 'There's one less life in this platter from today.' And went away. Though this event stayed in my mind long after the cremation, Grandfather never spoke about it to us.

Time—odourless, colourless, intangible—performed its relentless, dreadful dance over the house. Day after day, Grandfather leapt from one death to another. In the midst of all this, we boys kept growing. The ones that were not inclined to study sought out the crevices and corners of life, and derived immense pleasure from their discoveries. Grandfather no longer told stories. The boys no longer expected him to either. As I grew older and as more and more things came within the bounds of my comprehension, I began to develop a strange attachment to that platter.

Long ago, Kempavva, a woman from our village, had performed sati and her divine spirit had fused with the people. If she had something to convey, she did so through the platter. The platter would then appear in the dream of someone of its choice and convey the spirit's views. Grandfather had only heard of all this; he had never witnessed anything himself. I recalled him telling me and wondered why the platter did not appear to me in a dream, why did it not tell me the reasons for Grandfather's miserable condition, all his pains. I felt sad that the platter did not tell me why everybody looked like dead people, people bereft of love. So many nights I yearned for a platter dream. In that large house, one could see the open sky if one lay down in the central courtyard. As I lay there at night, watching the full moon, it transformed itself into a big, bright platter flooding my eyes and mind. But it never spoke to me. It didn't even wander into my dreams.

Everything and everyone was changing. One by one, glass cups, plastic boxes, aluminium plates and stainless steel utensils infiltrated the household. The movie-crazy uncle managed to instal an old radio there. At first, the women of the house were amazed at its workings and were scared, thinking it to be some kind of sorcery or a voice from some bewitched world. When it spoke or sang, they dropped the work at hand and sat listening to it, not understanding a word of what it said. It spoke a different

language. There was a world of difference between the Kannada of the radio and the Kannada we spoke at home. And after my little brother poked his finger into it when no one was around and was thrown by an electric shock and hurt his head, the women were convinced that it was an evil presence. But, like a great scientist, uncle opened it up as if to unravel its technological innards. He continued listening to the strange sounds that emanated from it, sitting there lost in communication with the words that originated from some unknown realm. When one day, Grandfather, infuriated by his obsession, threatened to throw the radio out of the house, uncle had retorted, 'If you throw the radio out, I'll throw your platter into the garbage heap!' After that Grandfather never paid any attention to the contraption. In any case, these days only Grandfather ate from the platter. The designs on it had begun to wear out.

As the days went by, I withdrew from the company of the other boys and became more and more of a loner. I also inherited the proclivity for depression that ran in the family. As we grew older, our sense of communal learning and reciprocity dried up and our elders no longer wished to be responsible for us. Only I divined a perturbing similarity between the concept of nullity that I learnt at school and the perfect roundedness of Grandfather's platter. When there was an eclipse, Grandfather would fill the platter with water and, when he failed to convince us of the various myths that he said were reflected in the image, he started to suspect that we had all begun to grow untrue to ourselves. My attachment to the platter grew, and I started to reclaim the memories of its days of glory. Once, the blind mute girl of the alley had become pregnant. When all else failed, it was decided to bring in the platter for divination. If Grandfather brought the platter from inside the house, offered prayers to it and held it on the ground, it would slide along the ground and come and stop in front of the guilty party. People got scared. The platter slid along, crossing over from our alley onto the road and came to a stop on the pathway leading to the headman's farm. The people from our locality then decided to call off the divination, picked up the platter and returned. Everyone in our locality shared the belief that the platter had the power to expose acts of untruth, injustice and cruelty, and held it in great respect. On the occasion of a birth, we beat the platter up and down the alley to welcome the new life. In case of death, the platter was placed beside the body, prayed to and the hand of the corpse was made to touch it so that the departed soul might reach heaven safely. Various rituals were performed with the platter, symbolizing the final parting of the body from the communal life of the alley. Our grandmothers explained to us through fabulous stories how the platter guided the departed soul to heaven.

Keeping pace with social changes, for one reason or another, all those beliefs about the platter fell away.

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But time had not withered our grandfather's resolve. He struggled with his ancient body, unshakeable in his conviction that till his dying day it would be his labours that kept the household fed. He always used to say, 'This body is meant to perish but it shouldn't be just allowed to die. Before that it should do some good and demonstrate its humanity.' This thought was certainly not shared by the others. My father was perpetually lost in a drunken stupor. Even so, my grandfather would at most make a sharp remark, skip his meal in anger and go to sleep ruminating over how and why human beings turn to self-destruction.

The way we dressed began to change. Radio uncle began to wear trousers and attractive banians. Another wore colourful lungis for the whole village to see and admire and indulged in all kinds of mischief to prove that he was a modern man. When I was a child, the house had never had a mirror; now it boasted a big fancy one that was hung on the wall so that it was visible from the street and reflected the many faces in the house. I was afraid of looking at myself in it. Though it was a taboo to look oneself in the mirror after sundown, my spinster aunts would examine their bodies for remnants of what had once been attractive to men. And though they never fondled me after I came of age, the memories haunted me like a curse. Two boys of my generation left home and went to town. They were seldom seen later. Two of my uncles sent three of their children into bonded labour, in the hope of improving their lives. They made plans upon plans and ground their teeth like saws when every plan went bust. Unknown to me, cracks had developed in the house. A big gulf had emerged between Grandfather's extraordinary vision of life, his values and ideals on the one hand, and the resentment-driven, directionless and distorted values of his children on the other. All bonds of humanity that he had held close lay shattered.

My father got involved with the village headman's affairs and desperately wished to live a life of similar power and pomp. His sole assets were the strength of his body, boundless cruelty and a mind capable of unimaginable machinations; and these had already earned for him the unchallenged leadership of the locality. He hung onto the headman, hoping to find an entry into the political arena, remaining completely insensitive to the needs of the house. One day he picked a quarrel about the platter and threatened that if he was ever served food on it, he'd smash it under a rock and throw it out of sight.

By then I was old enough to make some sense of the news that came to us over our uncle's radio. It spoke of strange lands, of wars and deaths by the thousands, conquests and bloodshed, victims of numberless famines, of murders, death and destruction—the radio announced these things in an unceasing torrent. I explained all this to Grandfather. By then my father had convinced himself that he had to eat from a stainless steel plate to mark of his new-found status in society. No one else could so much as touch that

stainless steel plate of his. But Grandfather's platter belonged to all; and we shared it among ourselves, as if it were the cultural experience that sustained our collective identity. Our grand-aunts still reposed deep faith in it and recalled with nostalgia the bygone days. Sometimes, while they were in a good mood, I'd ask them about things unbecoming of my age, making them talk about their times and loves. They laughed and spoke and described, mimicked and reminisced about people that I had never seen and they sighed in the memories of that lost past.

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The grinding wheel of time would distance me from everyone. Through the good offices of his old contacts, Grandfather got me admitted to a school in town. He had decided that at least I needed to be rescued from the oncoming destruction that awaited the family. On my part, I pretended to forget everything there and became absorbed in my books and studies. No one ever came to visit me in that distant town. Neither could I go to the village. But still, at least in the beginning, Grandfather's platter haunted me. I gathered all the news from home during my annual visits to the village and stoked those memories in an effort to keep them alive and glowing.

I would keep getting the news that, one by one, each one of my uncles had gone their separate ways. The large single household that once constituted an extended joint family, now enclosed houses within houses; each room, hall and veranda contained a separate family and within each mind arose impermeable walls that severed lives from other lives, so much so that the idea of family had lost all meaning. My contemporaries had all come of age and sprouted moustaches and each one began to nurse ambitions of striking out on his own. Every now and then, the house turned into a massive battlefield —and with no one around with the power to intervene and stop the fighting, brawls and skirmishes, shedding of blood and breaking of bones became a routine affair. Grandfather had moved out of the house into the little thatched hut he had built on a piece of land that the government had recently allotted him and lived all by himself.

In the midst of it all, the memory of my mother began to haunt me. The strange part of it was that, having grown up deprived of a mother's love, even when I tried to remember, her image escaped my mind. Radio-uncle, movie-uncle, sick-uncle, ailing grandmothers, spinster aunts, my father … all of them consumed me from a distance. Several times, in my imagination, I tried to transform myself into that innocent little boy and beseeched the platter to make an appearance in my dreams. When I wrote home, they said the letter got lost in the house seething with people. In any case, no one there really cared for those letters carrying my childish wishes. But once a letter of mine fell into Grandfather's hand and he carried it around in his pocket till the day I visited the

village to see him. He showed it to me and said all kinds of things trying to encourage me, ending with 'Read all there is to be read.'

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As I got more and more involved in my studies, everything, everyone, receded to a distance. And in the end, even Grandfather seemed to fade away. According to the latest family figures, five people had died and seven new lives added. Many of my dear grand-aunts, the ones that had confided in me their youthful loves, had passed away. The information invariably reached me long after the events. It seemed as if they had forgotten that I was a member of the family too. For my part, I began to develop an aversion towards the house, the locality and everything associated with it. No one in the house knew or seemed to care which year I had passed out of college or what I was graduating in. Neither my mother nor any of the women in the house could as much as name the degree I aspired for. If anyone inquired, they'd say, 'He's studying something!' I lost the desire to return to my village after my studies. I had become accustomed to the intricate violence of town life. In the village, people pestered my Grandfather with marriage alliances for me but returned with no success.

The sad part was that, despite all the changes, nobody in the house had any clue about why these tragedies filled their dreary lives, or any sense of a new way forward. Grandfather used to worry about it but the specific causes for the moribund state of house and the locality escaped him. His intimations were of a different order. In the meantime, the village had long since stopped using the platter either in religious rituals or on social occasions. People had decided that the platter from the degenerate house that had lost its purity retained none of its original power. There was once a time when people used to swear by the platter: 'We swear by this platter that we speak the truth.' Those who once sat around the platter at assemblies and passed verdicts today looked upon it as some counterfeit thing. The belief that only if the bride ate her first meal from that platter would she be blessed with happiness, wealth, progeny and all else had died too and with it departed faith in a communal life. With that, relations in the keri changed forever and, while there was a struggle to find new direction, nobody had any idea where they were heading. In that large house, the constant that could be relied upon was the swinging of the cradles. One or the other member made certain to add the name of a new child to the family, and in that found momentary joy. I had heard that our uncle of petty thieveries had graduated to greater deeds and had got caught in the process and was now languishing in Bangalore Central Jail. In his absence, his wife had an affair, became pregnant and, when the news of it got around in the village, tried to commit suicide, survived and now continues to live as the hub of a huge scandal. No one had thought of resorting to the platter for divination at that time. Since she was known all

over the village as the harlot who had got herself pregnant, she never moved out of the house. Her body bore ghastly scars of burns and brandings. To this day I cannot comprehend the depths of cruelty to which my uncles had plunged. They tortured her in a hundred different ways. It was as if even death had rejected her.

The village, the keri, the people were all passing through a time of rapid change. By then, my grandfather was more than a hundred years old. I had graduated from college. All five of my sisters had been married. The responsibility of conducting and paying for these weddings had fallen on Grandfather. Father and uncles had been present at the weddings to be sure, but they couldn't be bothered with the responsibilities that were associated with it. This was the period in my life when my thoughts, beliefs and ideological convictions set me fast against the traditional order and I opposed everything that took place at home. They had divided the house and each one had claimed his share. When it came to decide as to whose responsibility it was to look after the ailing old women awaiting death, a huge quarrel had erupted. One of my grandfather's sisters left the house in disgust and was now said to be living somewhere as a beggar. The house was the only property that we had, having no lands of our own. Some people had managed to get houses that the government had constructed for the scheduled castes. Others built little huts in the yard and lived separately. In the midst of all this, it was decided that the platter would be my father's share of the property. Grandfather kept away from all this. When the subject turned to me; some of my uncles had tried to force the issue, insisting that I should get myself a government job and, from my salary, contribute to the family's upkeep by sending a monthly amount, failing which I should take some of their children with me to town, admit them in convent schools and look after their education.

Grandfather intervened, 'On his own, he has struggled all along and got himself an education. We've no right to ask him for anything. Let him earn his two square meals a day and live. Leave him alone.'

But they were not the kind that gave up easily.

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As the years passed, the platter got submerged in the heap of the days gone by and everyone forgot about it. Even I didn't think of it the one time I visited that rusty old house. It didn't seem appropriate to me to worry too much about it in these new times. My uncles' children hardly recognized me and, since I was away so much, they even doubted that I was a member of the family. I was so annoyed by the way they treated me, like I was a stranger, that I headed back to the hellhole that was the town, vowing never to return to the village again. I didn't like the village but the town did not suit me either, so I lived through those days as an unofficial child of the world. Grandfather would stop

by at one of the many households of his descendants for his daily meal and this was about the only relationship he had with them. The good news was that radio-uncle, through an inscrutable combination of intelligence and tenacity, had mastered the technology of radios and had set up a small radio repair shop in the growing town.

Initially, the idea that they'd all be happy if they lived separately had excited them but these dreams had proven to be elusive. They were stalked by social, political and economic developments incomprehensible to them. My father was no longer associated with the village headman in local politics. He had broken out on his own and become a major player in our area; he did no other work. It pained me that my mother looked like an old woman in her thirty-eighth year. In the town, old women ran around made up like young girls. The sight of our women worming their way through life like sick old people frightened me.

There was a fragile peace between our locality and that of the upper castes but the underlying tensions could explode into a conflagration at any moment. Once, long ago, when a conflict had arisen, members of both communities had sworn by the platter that they'd never again give occasion for a similar event. That agreement did not hold any longer. My father, as the leader of our community, utilized these opportunities for his political advancement.

The years melted away meaninglessly. In the village, being adult had become synonymous with grey-haired men lounging on verandas, dredging out people's private lives to gloat, discuss and argue over—all of it resulting in misunderstanding or allegations and bitter enmities. Grandfather had grown old and sat immobile in a corner, the lone survivor of his times. The village looked upon him as a living fossil. Though I had no reason to complain against anyone in particular in the village, I had, for reasons unknown to me, developed a deep hatred towards everyone there over the years. My sick uncle cursed everyone with death and every day threatened to die on the next.

One day, more than five years after my last contact with the village, I received a letter. They had got someone to write this for them: 'Your seventh uncle's daughter has eloped with someone and has brought disgrace on the whole family. If you happen to see her in the town, bring her over!' Of course, looking for her in this big town would be like digging up the roots and madness of my family, so I didn't even attempt that task. For some reason, that day, memories of my grandfather, the platter, the locality, our childish pranks, aunts' songs, us singing the 'Song of the Cow' and making the aunts cry, and our own tears at the end of it … all these memories simmered in my mind. I didn't bother to reply to the letter. Grandfather acted as if he was immune to all worldly sorrows. He had once told me that when he was very ill and about to die, he had been to the netherworld and that the netherworld was in fact in the south side of the village, where the graveyard was. Our locality was invariably on the south side of the village

and, in a sense, was symbolic of the graveyard. That we should live in the southern direction was the tradition. Apparently, Grandfather saw all his ancestors in the netherworld. They had survived all the tortures and had driven Grandfather back, insisting that his time had not yet come. Rising from his fevered stupor, he told everyone that the netherworld was where they all lived.

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Grandfather's relationship with the world had always been tentative. But now it seemed he intended to sever even that connection. His body had seen long years of wear and had begun degenerating long ago. I had anticipated it. And it arrived. The bad news. The letter reached late; it said that Grandfather was on his deathbed. Though I was gratified that the letter had actually reached me, albeit a month and a half late, I was terrified by the thought that Grandfather might have died in the meantime. It felt as if I was about to lose all my connections with the world. I replied immediately and waited. Then the news arrived. Grandfather hadn't died. The next sentence said, he was about to die and that I should return immediately. My school-going nephew had written: 'Although you do not care for us, although you have not been helpful to us in any way, though Grandfather doesn't mean anything to you, you must come without fail immediately as Grandfather wants to see you.' I went, wondering what it was that made Grandfather cling to life for more than a month, just so that he could speak to me.

I had killed so many memories of the village. My mind all knotted up, I had begun to look quite mad. They had prepared Grandfather's bed in the outer veranda of the big house. They had also decided that he deserved to be treated with respect and kindness, at least in his last days. And that the dying man should not have any unfulfilled desires —which meant that they cooked all his favourite dishes, placed it in front of him and devoured it themselves. No one was particularly concerned with whether he ate anything or not. On his part, he did not demand anything. All my uncles seemed tired of waiting for his death. When I landed there, everyone looked at me strangely and behaved as though they didn't recognize me. Grandfather was asleep and I didn't feel like waking him up. I looked at him awhile and then came out and looked around. I didn't recognize many of the people there. They were born after I had left the village. I must have seemed like a stranger to them. I sat with one of my nephews in the yard and found out all that I could about Grandfather. He also filled me in on the family. Many relatives had visited to see Grandfather for one last time. Even that day, there were several of them at home. The aunts, who used to kiss me and watch in the mirror the tragedy of their youth slipping away, had become old women. They had remained unmarried. Nobody wanted to marry them. They inquired after my health, nervously. 'At last he's come to visit us sinners!' one of them taunted.

I began to fear what Grandfather would say. People around him pestered him with questions but he did not respond. Many tried repeatedly, so that, after his death, they could spin tales about what they had asked him and what he had told them. But he was silent. He didn't so much as look at their faces.

Each and everyone who landed there on the pretext of Grandfather's imminent death went about as if they'd attain salvation by fulfilling his last wishes. With so many people there, the house had a festive atmosphere. The little boy in knickers had grown up. He sat in a corner, as if all this was of no concern to him, drawing a figure of the human body. Against the arrows pointing to the different parts, he wrote their names, in English. I learnt that my father dropped in and out of the house at unearthly hours. My mother stared at my face with dead eyes and let flow a stream of tears. Since I never got an opportunity to see her while she had slaved in front of the fire, cooking to feed all the mouths in that big house, it seemed as if I was seeing her at such close quarters and for so long for the first time in my life. I hadn't come here to see death. It seemed as if I had come to see people who had crossed death and were on the edge of something else. It was an effort to talk to anyone. My sister had come home to birth her baby. And in that old cradle which had borne me, my sister and countless other children of the house, her child lay alone, drooling and staring at the sky that came in through the open courtyard.

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Grandfather heard of my arrival and opened his eyes. He peered at me through his tired eyes and muttered something. I sat down beside him and held his hand. My sister's child continued to babble. Grandpa stroked my face. He asked about my degree.

Unable to repeat what I had said, he observed, 'That means you've finished all there is to study. Now all that's left is to cross the seas in a ship, isn't that it?'

I nodded. His eyes filled with tears. I remembered that, when I was a little boy, he dreamt that I would study everything there was to be studied and come back to the village suited and booted like Ambedkar, a prince. For a long time, neither of us spoke. His rough hands that had laboured to bring us up, battling against all odds, now clasped my limp hand. He had sent for me, saying that he wanted to see his grandson, the one studying in town, once before he died. Relatives, the people from the keri and my uncles sat gossiping on the veranda. Convinced that Grandfather had hung onto life with the sole purpose of tormenting them, they thought that since his favourite grandson had arrived, he would say whatever he wished to say and die in a day or so.

Grandfather let out a deep sigh and said, 'I have a wish. Will you fulfil it?'

'Tell me. Whatever it is, I will fulfil it,' I said, trying to remain calm.

'I'll tell it only to you. Send the others away.'

‘No, no. You belong to all of us. What you have to say pertains to all of us. Say it to everyone,’ I said and waited.

‘Alright, you are an educated and knowledgeable person. Let it be as you say, I will speak in front of everybody. If you insist, I’ll speak in front of everyone. Call them over.’

I called everyone over. They barged in, as if to watch some wonder, and sat down all over the place.

Grandfather pulled all his strength together and said, ‘My desire … my one last wish, you can fulfil it …’ and opened his eyes.

I was overcome by a mad confidence. ‘Tell me. No matter what, I’ll fulfil your desire.’

Everyone waited in silence to catch his words. Only the slurping of the infant suckling at my sister’s breast broke the silence. Grandfather remained quiet for a long while. I was in a sweat, thinking that, any moment now, he would give voice to the final desire in this life.

Then he implored, ‘Long ago, when … when you were little … we had that big platter. Will you bring it to me?’

When they heard this—his last wish—the people in the room burst into a raucous laughter that shook the whole house. And they did not stop. To the strange request of a dying man, our house responded equally strangely. Only I couldn’t laugh. Frightened by the laughter, the suckling infant let out a cry. Humiliated, Grandfather turned over and covered his face like a child. He had believed that as long as that platter was in the house, the purity of our family would be preserved, happiness and wealth would fill the house; and it was that platter that he wanted at the moment of his death.

Tears welled up in my eyes. How could I tell him that it was impossible to get the platter for him? No one remembered where it was. Even I had forgotten it. When the house was divided and each one went his way, someone, someday, many years ago, for some reason had stolen it and pawned it to the village headman. Most of the younger ones didn’t even know that such a platter had ever existed. Since nobody had come to reclaim it for many years, the people in the headman’s house had made it their own.

Then, in the midst of all the commotion, I heard one of my uncles say mockingly, ‘That … it’s been gone for a long time now. Remember the large copper cauldron in the headman’s house? It sprang a leak and they used the platter to mend the hole. There is no way it can be recovered.’

They were all still laughing. Grandfather’s eyes welled up with tears as they searched mine. I had never cried like this before, ever. Unable to stay there for a moment longer, I marched out to the backyard hurriedly. All the days past, all the

moments, all past events were baying, ready to pounce on me. The moment my eyes fell on the tree, the vision of mad aunt leaning against that tree staring at the sky with her dead eyes hit me. The blazing noon sun floated over the sky. My eyes floated in tears. Unable to bear it any longer, feeling dizzy, I looked at the sky. In the middle of the wide open sky, the blazing sun resembled my grandfather's platter. I stood there, still, dazzled.

Subbu Holeyar

Subbu Holeyar identifies himself as one among a large group of dalits who began writing in the context of the boosa movement of the mid-1970s. 'The DSS songs and rights campaigns made me conscious of my social situation. The famous song on the rape of Anasuyamma was especially influential in shaping my thinking.' Kumbara Sheshagiriappa, a person belonging to kumbara [potter] community, which comes under the category 'most backward castes', was brutally killed, and his daughter Anasuyamma raped, ostensibly because he opposed the grabbing of a piece of land that belonged to him. Krishnegowda, a vokkaliga who was president of the Taluk Board, was responsible for these crimes, which took place at Hunasikote in the Malur taluk of Kolar district in 1979. The event was one of the watersheds in the growth of the DSS.

Holeyar was born in 1962 and grew up in Hethur village in Sakleshpur taluk of Hassan district, which was a forest area. It was a traditional set up: 'In our village, atrocities against dalits—though not on the scale of Belchi or Karamchedu—were not uncommon. We could not enter a tea shop; the dalits in the area did not own land and nearly all of them worked as labourers in houses or the fields of landlords who were all vokkaligas and gowdas. His father, Komaraiah, held grazing rights over an acre and a half of land but the family survived on the three rupees that he earned for a day's labour in the coffee or cardamom plantations. Komaraiah died of tuberculosis in 1977 when Subbu was in class nine. He was only about fifty years old. 'My mother walked the twenty-four kilometres to the hospital to see him. She took some slaked lime paste to spread on his betel leaves but returned without seeing him; he had passed away,' Subbu says. Three brothers died young: one fell from a tree, another of polio, the third died when he was still an infant. That left a family of three: Subbu, his mother Thippamma and a sister.

The practice of kulvadi was prevalent at the time. This meant that the holeyas had to undertake free services for the vokkaliga landlords on occasions like death and marriage. This could last a week or more. Since Subbu was the only male in his family, the 'honour' fell on him, despite the fact that he was just a school-going child. Despite all this, he passed his tenth-standard examinations in the first attempt and went on to take physics, chemistry, maths and biology at the intermediate level. However, he failed both attempts; maths did him in. Meanwhile, DSS activism was beginning to create an impact. Two leaders, B. Krishnappa and Chandrappa Tyagi, visited the social welfare

hostel at Hassan and told the students about the atrocities against dalits at Belchi and Pipra (1977–78). 'Krishnappa spoke on Ambedkar, about untouchability, the Constitution and the significance of education. Those were the most inspiring words I had ever heard.' Through the DSS, they also read Lohia and attended public speeches by Lohiaite leaders like Kishen Patnaik from Bihar.

An early campaign was to get children out of bonded labour and into school. Sadly, of the 125 children admitted in the local school each year, only ten or so continued long enough to finish. They earned Rs 1.25 if they plucked cardamom or coffee, or took the animals out to graze. Subbu himself would do such jobs on Saturdays. He also became more and more involved with DSS activities—reading Ambedkar, *Lankesh Patrike*, the writings of Siddalingaiah and Lankesh himself and Telugu poetry in translation. They organized three-day camps, in which issues such as land, women's oppression, education and dalit struggles were discussed. His name first appeared in print in a question-and-answer column to which he wrote in with questions that would often get published. Krishnappa encouraged him to write poems. His first attempt—titled 'We are lions'—was 'influenced by radical Telugu poetry and had a bandaya spirit'.

It was not long before Subbu was working more or less full-time as a DSS activist. Between 1979 and '85, he was the DSS taluk convener in Sakleshpur. He worked for a short while with the K.V. Subbana–led Ninasam[1] drama troupe before signing up for their diploma in drama. 'We saw film classics from all over the world, read literature widely, learnt about different forms of theatre. My mind expanded and I acquired a real maturity and seriousness. I found myself returning to the study of Ambedkar, Lohia, Gandhi.'

It was while he was at Ninasam that David Attenborough's film *Gandhi* was released. It made no mention of Ambedkar. 'The dalits were infuriated; some even released snakes in the theatre. Then news arrived that Devanoora Mahadeva had gone to see the film. Not only had he seen the film, he made a public announcement that he had done so. Then Siddalingaiah came out saying: "the freedom of everyone is linked to my freedom …" I began to realize that we needed to take Gandhi more seriously.'

In 1990, Subbu Holeyar got a job as a property and wardrobe assistant in Doordarshan and he moved to Bangalore, where he now lives, works and writes poetry. In 2005, a first collection of poetry, *Sooji Gathrada Koleveyinda Manushyanobbana Haadu* (Song of a Man from a Needle-sized Tube**)** was published; a second collection is to appear. He was the 2007 editor of the annual Karnataka Sahitya Akademi poetry collection, and is a popular chair at poetry meets. His poems have been prescribed in the Kannada literature syllabi of Dharwad, Kuvempu and Mangalore universities. Among the many awards he received are the Kannada Sahitya Akademi award, the Dr G.S. Shivarudrappa award, an award from the well-known literary magazine *Shudra*,

the Dinakara Desai award and the Athi Mabbhe award. ‘I want my poetry—like that of Neruda, Soyinka and the leading dalit poets in my own language—to be a true companion to the exploited people. The life and teaching of the Buddha have added a new dimension to my poetry,’ he writes.

I Could Have, Even Now …

Translated by Laxmi Chandrashekar

I could have simply stayed on
like my father, like his father
and his
in the same house, in the same street
I could have, even now …
pinched myself
to see if it was me
the image in the mirror
that strange sparkle in the eye.

Village, street, towns
changing with time,
forests and rocks bared,
village fences
remaining unbroken
shrank.

The house with the small veranda
I lived in
didn’t move an inch
in the landscape of the rich man’s breast.
The stance my father took

crossing stagnant waters,
sailing in a dream boat,
like hundreds of birds flying away—
joyous cries of freedom
there, even now …

Not touching filth.
Keeping vows to the village deity,
without
offering unbroken bunch of fruit
my grandfather, wrapped in his black blanket,
praying within, said,
‘Bless the world, Mother Sugyamma.’

My father forgot.
My father’s father and his father also did.
I cannot.
The child of his grandson’s son
when I see them pinch you
and watch you cry
laughing
even now …

Killers Drink the Milk of the Cow

Translated by Laxmi Chandrashekar

Do let my killers live—
they must drink the milk of the cow,
they must chant prayers to God,
become landowners, grab power.

They take life
not knowing how life is lived—
these religious folks killing for religion,
these patriots who try to save religion.

Don't restrain the killers.
They must kill more folks like me.
Killers drink the milk of the cow;
the killed, their mother's milk.

Reasons, religious reasons, political reasons
are your ornaments.
They peel the skin.

I am the great-grandson of Maadara Chenna,
the cobbler who made fiery sandals
out of his own skin.
Jumping in the ecstasy of killing,
may your feet not get sore,
may your hands not become heavy,
may your swords not grow blunt,
may your throat not be rent
by your angry shouts.

My body
reduced to ashes by hate
is carried away by the cool wind.
I shall be back as
a moment in history.

Anti-racism Conference in Durban?

Translated by Laxmi Chandrashekar

Feet keep running through my head
so fast that this minute
all the streets of Durban
seem as familiar as the doorway to my house.

The day my friend Benjamin Moloise was hanged,
veins in my neck swelled with grief.
How I wandered
for those humiliated like me.

There, in Durban
the honourable have all assembled
to discuss the dishonoured.
A loud conference hall.
Dancing animated
at the tip of every tongue
the same slogan,
'All humanity is one'
leaping out at me,
so harsh, so cruel.

Why wasn't I born as a dog at least
in this land?
Oh the colour of the earth I stand on,
oh mild, cool breeze,
oh supreme race of the land,
tell me if
I have ever been treacherous like you.
That could reduce me to trash.
Feeling few qualms over your injustice
we did too little.

He should have been tortured more
you guffaw
More cruelly
Social Scientists, decide,
dissect all humiliated hearts,
spread them on the glass tabletop,
measure the size of the wound,
its volume and length.
I stand outside waiting for the results
so that a few lives may be saved.

Oh enraged mind,
close your eyes and think
if what Buddha, Basava, Babasaheb preached
have penetrated any ears.

You who created all this are sitting in Durban
talking about it, listening and looking;
my street will be there tomorrow too.
And all of you, more famous.
We will congratulate you on that, all of us
members of a race made to eat shit.

Colour is external.
Caste internal.
Colour fades away into the colourful.
Caste remains alive
to be used by the clever.

Oh seminar birds
of the conference on racism,
if you have words that remain unsaid,
speeches unmade,

send them to me.
I shall take them with me
when I die.

B.T. Jahnavi

This well-regarded writer and theatre personality from Davangere describes her short stories as emerging out of a dalit sensibility as well as an urban middle-class woman's sensibility. The complex intersection of these two aspects in contemporary life involves her both as a writer and as a person. Though she grew up in a middle-class environment, Jahnavi's family kept close touch with their village, visiting often; their relatives came and stayed. 'Our house was like a choultry, always full of relatives and friends. Everyone was treated equally—there were never any distinctions made,' she recalls.

Jahnavi was born in 1963. Her father, B.M. Thippeswamy, was a well-known and popular eye doctor who had trained in London and was highly regarded by his patients and in the community. (Du Saraswathi, dalit writer, told us that her brother was inspired by Thippeswamy to study ophthalmology.) He is, Jahnavi avers, her eyes shining, her ideal.

'We led a simple, honest life and grew up learning that we were neither superior nor inferior to anyone.' Two childhood experiences illuminate both the depth of this egalitarianism and the influence her father had on her life. Once, when she was in the fifth—or maybe sixth—standard, the person who worked for them in their home came to school with her lunch. She recalls that day, 'He found me in class and said, "Paapi, your mother cooked mutton [my favourite] today, but the curry is not ready yet, so I have brought you some ragi mudde and vegetables. Come, eat soon. It's nice and hot." I was furious. When I got home that evening I complained to Father: "How could he speak like that, calling me by my pet name in front of everyone and talking meat!" My father listened patiently and said, "If you are ashamed of eating meat, stop eating it." After that, the mutton curry used to come and I would eat it in front of everybody!'

Another story Jahnavi tells is this one: 'I should also tell you about Shobha. She was in my class, this beautiful brahmin girl. I wanted to be her friend, her special friend and be like her in every way—beautiful, English-speaking, admired. One day she asked me to finish the leftover food in her lunch box (her parents were very strict and she was afraid she would get hauled up for not finishing her food). I refused because I had also just eaten and was not hungry. She didn't say anything at the time but when I got back to class after lunch I found that she had written on the board: "Jahnavi is a madiga. She eats all kinds of meat—mutton, pork, beef." Until then, I had been part of the class.

After that, the other children shunned me. I was devastated. I did not want to go back to school. Father was away. I knew that if he was at home he would not let me drop out. So I took a rupee from my mother's purse and boarded a bus. It was late in the evening. Fortunately, one of my father's patients noticed me and took me back home. When Father returned, he asked me what had happened. "I don't want to go to school any more," I told him.'

He asked why. Her father's response changed Jahnavi's life, she says. 'If you admire Shobha,' he told her, 'you should work hard and become like her—better than her. She should come and ask for your friendship. Work on yourself, develop your personality.' Jahnavi says, 'The next day, he found me an English tutor, bought me lots of books. I kept my distance from her, began acting in plays, became a jolly person with a group of friends around me … and, believe it or not, a year or so later, Shobha actually came to me and said, "Jahnavi, let's be friends." This experience changed my personality completely; that is when I began writing.'

Talking about her sensibility as a woman takes Jahnavi back to her childhood again. Her mother always had a soft corner for her brother. There was always enough for everyone but the choicest pieces of meat would be kept aside for him; his likes and dislikes would be specially attended to. Jahnavi used to protest. 'I was very rebellious. Whatever my mother said, I would do the opposite. My father used to advise her saying: "Speak to this child with affection, appeal to her reason; never scold her …"' Jahnavi finds this asymmetry everywhere: 'Women have no right to desire sex, or to ask for it. If they do, they are thought of as "bad" women. It is so humiliating. How can there be a good relationship on those terms?' 'Vyabhichara', the first of the two stories translated here, raised a storm in Kannada reading circles when it was published in 1987.

Another milestone in her life as a writer was marriage. In her family, her parents, and especially her father, were her friends. 'I expected that to be so in my husband's home as well … I grew very lonely.' Her diary became her outlet. Later, she found that many of the entries easily took the shape of stories. Some of her most moving stories are about women's sexuality.

Jahnavi has published two collections of short stories, *Kaledukonddavalu Mattu Itara Kathegalu* (The Lost Girl and Other Stories, 1996), and *Hudukaata* (Hide 'n' Seek, 2007) and a biography of her father *Muttisikondavaru* (The One Who Got Touched, 1999). For the biography, she travelled widely, meeting his friends, colleagues and patients. The book's richness is the richness of those memories.

Adultery

Translated by Bageshree S.

My sister Savita stormed into the room screaming, ‘Ley Suji … it’s coming …’ as I was getting ready for my afternoon siesta.

‘Where?’ I asked, trying to open my eyes to some alertness.

‘What can you see if you sit here and ask questions? Quick, the creature will disappear into the cave if you don’t rush here this very minute,’ said Savi, dragging me out of the room by my hand.

It was perfectly timed. Just as we stepped out into the veranda, the creature passed our house. We peeped through the window and caught it entering the gate of the second house in the opposite row and pressing the calling bell. The door flung open within seconds. We couldn’t see the person who had opened the door, but could clearly see the creature slip in.

Savi said mockingly as the door closed, ‘Wonder where it had disappeared for fifteen days. A contract elsewhere, perhaps!’

‘Who knows to which wretched place … Now back here!’ I added.

We pulled our heads back from the window and climbed up the terrace. We decided to play carrom to pass time and were just arranging the pawns when we heard the gate again. We got up quickly to see the creature leaving the house.

It was already nearing our house when I exclaimed, ‘What a surprise! He is out in ten minutes!’

Both of us rolled with laughter when she said, ‘I thought it would finish at least three rounds before getting out today … Something must be wrong!’

The creature turned back as if it heard what we were saying. It was already at the bend of the road by the time we came down and opened the door. Vimala aunty from the house opposite had also come out.

‘How come the fellow appeared so suddenly?’ she asked, laughing.

‘Aunty, the news is not how suddenly he appeared, but how he scooted in ten minutes!’ said Savita, winking.

Vimala opened her eyes wide and giggled, ‘Girl, you are growing a bit too smart!’

Soon there were three or four groups on the road. Without doubt, the topic of discussion across all of them was the same.

‘I thought he had come to say goodbye …’

‘It’s not so easy to let go …’

Yes, aunty, it’s hard, isn’t it?’

‘How can the man of the house not know of this when the entire street does?’

‘That’s a wonder!’

Discussion centred on the same issue, an irresolvable riddle to everyone. It was nearly two years ago that the creature had started showing up on our street. But this was the first time that it had disappeared for two weeks. My mind went back to the events of two years ago.

The man of the house was Muttanna. He had the look of a thirty-five-year-old, though he was around forty-five. His wife Leelavati was a perfect match for him. They had two endearing children, Ravi and Kiran. On the whole, a lovely family. Leelavati was friendly; Leelakka to us all. She was a beautiful woman. Leelakka was usually free from the time the children left for school till they returned in the evening. She spent her time knitting or painting. Though she was quick to make friends with everyone, she was particularly close to me. Simple though clearly wealthy, she was the darling of everyone on the street. I thought of her as my own sister and was her constant companion whenever she went out. We often chatted till midnight. Muttanna was rarely in town and it was almost always twelve by the time he returned home. I had hardly ever seen them go out together. We had never seen relatives and friends visit them either.

And then, suddenly, this creature appeared on the scene. Leelakka had told me that he was a distant relative. He was the first relative I had seen entering their house. The tall and lanky man couldn’t be described as particularly good-looking. He came once or twice a month, but gradually started turning up every day. Leelakka did not step out of the house as long as he was around. As we saw more of him, we saw less of Leelakka. That he visited when no one else was at home led to much speculation and suspicion among people on the street. Some women had already stopped speaking to her. But she spoke to me in her usual friendly manner whenever she did come out. The man never seemed to meet Muttanna. The initial seed of suspicion was growing into a huge tree. I had wanted to ask her about it several times, but hesitated, feeling shy. Mother had already expressed her disapproval of my intimacy with Leelakka. I would find her in a foul temper whenever I returned after a visit to Leelakka. Savi, Vimala aunty and others were on Mother’s side. I still had a soft corner for Leelakka. But an incident that occurred on a Friday afternoon changed my opinion too. It proved to me that what I had always wanted to believe as false was really true.

That day, when my aunt and I were chatting in the living room, Savi screamed ‘Suji … Aunty …’ from the room on the first floor. We ran up to find Muttanna, who never came home in the afternoon, standing at the door, pressing the calling bell. The man was

inside then. Savi immediately climbed the ladder and went up to the open terrace. We followed her. From there, we could clearly see the backyards of the houses in the opposite row. We caught him escaping through the back door of the house. Savi whistled loudly. We could also see the front door open and Muttanna go in, asking, 'What took you so long?'

Looking at my drawn face, Savi asked, 'Why has your face shrunk? I've caught your Leelakka with proof. Do you believe at least now that there is something illicit happening between them?'

All the good opinion I had of Leelakka flew away in a moment.

'People in red-light areas are better than these kinds. They at least take to this path because of some pressure or compulsion …' Savi and Aunty were dissecting Leelakka's character.

It wasn't long before the entire street knew the results of Savi's research. The street's tongue grew longer. Since that day, I avoided Leelakka's house. I turned my face away when she tried to talk to me. When she came out on a rare occasion, Savi would taunt her, pretending to talk to Vimala aunty. 'How come you're out today, Aunty? Do you have a holiday or what?' 'How many rounds today, Aunty?' Leelakka would instantly go back into the house. How many times Savi had spat 'thoo …' as the man passed our house. But he wouldn't even lift his bent head until he stood before Leelakka's gate. When such regular meetings ceased for fifteen days, we had all wrongly assumed that everything had come to an end.

Meanwhile, our parents were on the lookout for grooms for both of us. There seemed to be some special attraction in Savi. All the boys who came wanted to marry her. After four or five such incidents, my dreams of a marriage began to melt. I fasted and fussed to convince my parents to get Savi married off first. Finally, Shekhar, a bank employee, became Savi's husband. Before leaving for her husband's house, she said, laughing, 'Write to me every week, don't forget to report on that creature!'

An entire year passed before we knew it. The house seemed all empty to me without Savi. Her husband was as reserved as she was talkative. He kept to himself. Savi's life too changed as years rolled by. Two children, Suresh and Satish, filled her life. She rarely came home. I would write to her myself, assuming she might be too busy managing children and home. I sent reports on the creature without fail.

One day, I was busy cooking as usual when I heard an auto stop before the house. I came out to see Savi with her family! The unexpectedness of the visit doubled my joy. Savi looked pale and gaunt, shorn of her old liveliness. The children were happy in the company of their grandparents. Savi was coming home after so long and I had plenty to tell her. But I couldn't catch her alone because Shekhar was around. A week went by in

no time. The Sunday of her departure was nearing. I was busy thinking up plans to make her stay back another week. I was disappointed that she had not so much as mentioned the creature. The man came only once in a way these days. But I could not tell Savi this —at least not in her husband's presence. Just as I expected, Savi somehow managed to convince her husband to let her stay on a week longer. Shekhar left that night with the children. I was happy, anticipating Savi's naughty repartee again.

That day we decided to play carrom in the room on the first floor. When she complained it was too hot, I opened the windows wide with a teasing smile, 'Hot, are you?' And as luck would have it, the guy appeared that very day!

'Savi! What perfect timing!' I said, eager to hear what she had to say.

But Savi was very serious. Not a smile, not a word. Her eyes were fixed on the house. I'd never seen her like this before.

I shook her, 'What are you staring at?'

She said, 'Haa …' as if she had woken up from a dream with a start. 'Suji, your Leelakka is really great … That man and she are people of courage …'

It was a wonder that I didn't faint with shock when she said this. No one knew better than me the depth of her contempt for Leelakka. She would behave as if the very sight of her was revolting.

'Why Savi? Aren't you feeling well?' I asked, worried. 'You were repulsed by the very mention of her name … Now you are saying she is great … That too when you have a husband as good as God and children pretty as pearls …'

She stopped me short with, 'No, Suji … She wouldn't have felt the need to look at another man if she had found within her own home the happiness and pleasure she desperately needed. They just don't care, even though the whole street talks about them. Some guts that …'

Savi's words were making me anxious. As if leading her on to think in another direction, I told her again and again, 'Whatever it is, don't forget it is adultery. It is an illicit relationship …'

'What is adultery? Who has ever seen what happens behind closed doors? Can there be nothing between a man and a woman in privacy except that? Let's assume it is adultery. But then why do you blame Leelakka alone? Is it good enough if you have a house and money to spend? Yes, her children are lovely, but is having children the end of it all? Leelakka is still young. Is it wrong to expect love and intimacy from one's husband after the children are born? He is never at home, always busy with his business, travelling from town to town. Have you ever seen the two of them go out together? Is she a piece of dead wood to simply lie inert in that big bungalow without ever laughing or talking? That's why I say Leelakka is bold. She is enjoying life on her

own terms rather than withering away like a piece of wood eaten up by termites from within. Yes, she would have stayed confined within boundaries if she were a coward. But what about one's thoughts? Who can control that? She would have desired another man at least in her mind and found pleasure in her thought. To put in bluntly, she would have been an adulteress in her mind … Like me!'

'Savi!' I screamed. My voice was shaking.

'Why? Does it disgust you to think that your Savi is Leelakka with another face?' she asked.

I found myself stammering. 'Savi … Savi … Shekhar …'

'Shekhar!' she said, her expression carrying the same intensity of contempt and disgust she once reserved only for Leelakka.

I wanted to burst out crying. Her grim demeanour and the contempt with which she spoke of her husband had convinced me that something had gone terribly wrong.

She shared her agony when we were in bed that night. 'Suji, I had imagined I was the happiest person for two years after my marriage. Perhaps all women imagine that. As you know, I rarely ever stayed away from Shekhar. He came straight into my arms after work. Once my head was on his chest, I was in a stupor till morning. It was such intoxication. I could never go to sleep if I was not snug in his arms. Suresh was growing inside me, an expression of this love.

'But Shekhar, I realized, is a sex-obsessed, selfish man. Two children born in a row occupied our lives entirely. Their arrival brought many changes. Though this was inevitable, he did not have the patience or generosity to understand it. He just wanted his share of pleasure. Suresh kept falling ill until he turned two. Housework and the task of looking after two young children tired me out. All my attention was focused on the children. I could not possibly have run into Shekhar's arms the minute he came home like earlier. It was impossible to satisfy him. He started growing impatient and short-tempered. He was in no state of mind to even listen to me. "You are not the only woman to have had children. All women bear children and are yet so lively," he would mock me, comparing me with his colleagues and other women. He was very distant with the children too. Things got so bad that he started returning home only by midnight. We hardly spoke any more and I began to feel as if he were a stranger. This made me anxious and I even hired a help to look after the children. I got the children accustomed to her and started showering all my attention on Shekhar. I waited patiently for him to change. But he seemed beyond change. He was always busy travelling, and home was just a place for occasional meals. It was a roll in bed when he chose to. That too without uttering a word. His behaviour hurt me. Unable to bear it, I would sometimes weep. This infuriated him even more and he would throw a fit screaming, "What has

happened to you?" This seared my heart. I had no peace. Starved of his love, I was going mad. He hadn't given me a warm hug in ages. If I hugged him, he would brush me aside with, "Just lie down quietly now, I am sleepy."

'Once I lost my temper and shook him, screaming, "I am not sleepy. What should I do, tell me!"

'He jumped up and screamed back, "You can't sleep? Tell me what I should do. I shall do just that … "

'His ugly behaviour made me want to drop dead right there. I wanted to scratch myself all over and scream aloud like a mad woman.

'I had never dreamt that I would have to endure such an insult. He was mocking my womanhood. He had shredded me to pieces. God alone knows how many nights I spent without a wink of sleep. It was as if he were taking revenge on me. I didn't know what he did outside the house. I didn't bother to find out. I stopped longing for him. I had no expectations left of him. My feelings for him were beginning to die. But my thoughts often wandered to Leelakka those days, as if to provide proof of my emotions not being entirely dead. And that creature … I remembered him too. I could understand Leelakka's predicament. That couple entered my thoughts the minute I closed my eyes. Slowly, Leelakka faded out and he alone remained. He sometimes looked like the hero of a film I had watched and sometimes like the protagonist of a story I had read. I learnt to fall asleep …' Savi stopped and looked at me.

I was dumbstruck.

She stared at me for half a minute and said, 'I am talking bluntly. Don't think I am deliberately trying to hurt you. I am just saying it like it is. Suji, you have no idea about the pleasure of a man's company; you may not understand my turmoil. But it is cruel once you experience it and are then denied. Sometimes I feel like killing myself …' I instantly closed her mouth. She gently pushed my hand aside and smiled wryly, 'I would have lived boldly like Leelakka if I had so much courage …'

It was already a week since Savi had left. This time she had taken Mother along. I was alone at home. The vegetable vendor was calling outside. I came out to check what vegetables he had brought that day. Leelakka was buying something from him. I didn't feel disgust at the sight of her. Contempt did not well up inside me. Instead, I called her 'Leelakka' like in the old times, without a second thought.

'Have you had your lunch, Leelakka?'

She seemed taken aback for a moment and made no effort to hide her surprise. 'Yes, I have had my lunch, how about you?' she asked, her face aglow with the pleasant surprise. She didn't stay for long. 'See you later, Suji, I have things to wind up,' she said, disappearing inside with her vegetable basket.

Anyone else in her place may have spat on my face, considering how badly we had treated her in the past. But Leelakka had always treated me with courtesy. I repeated what Savi had said, ‘Leelakka, you really are great!’

Mother’s Cauldron

Translated by Bageshree S.

The sparkling brass cauldron, scrubbed over and over with a mixture of tamarind, salt, powdered brick and rough coconut husk lent a special charm to the entire house. Always filled to the brim with still, cool water it was a source of solace to the very soul. The cauldron was never left empty; it was a precious gift to Shivamma from her maternal home. She took care of it as if it were her own child. She never let a grain of dust sit on it or a blemish tarnish its sheen.

To her, the cauldron held the sum of her childhood, her youth and her maternal home. She could feel the souls of her parents Appayya and Avvayya, who had reached the feet of Shiva long ago, still breathe inside it. Shivamma relived memories of that household by the potful every time she filled the cauldron. How she came to acquire it is a heart-stirring tale.

Shivamma was the only child of Bharamappa and Gauramma of Muttenahatti. Cholera had claimed three children born before her and she was the only surviving child, precious as ruby to her parents. Her father, Bharamappa, would stake his very life to bring home anything she asked for. He worked as a coolie in the gowda’s farm. It was Shivamma who took him lunch every day, packed in a neat cloth bundle. Bharamappa’s brother’s son Garuda would always reach there just as she finished swimming in the tank and dried her clothes sitting on the adjoining rock. He would quickly climb on the rock and open his lunch.

They would start playing once they finished their meal of ragi balls with red chilli kempindi and boiled eggs. The friendly games of chowkabara and aanekallu would soon turn into big fights. Shivamma had to win by hook or crook. Garuda knew it was impossible to beat this little cheat of a girl and would head homeward with his herd of cows shouting as he went that her way of winning was no winning at all. Shivamma too would go home, riding the buffalo that had a mark on its forehead. This was the story every day.

One day, when Garuda did not turn up, Shivamma insisted on accompanying her father to the gowda's house. In the backyard of the house, the gowdathi's distant relative Ningi had just scrubbed the brass cauldron and kept it upside down to dry in the sun. Drawn by the colour and sheen of the cauldron, Shivamma had hugged it with both her little arms, stretching them with difficulty to cover its huge girth. Ningi had started screaming the minute she saw this. The gowdathi, who came running to inquire what had happened, had kicked up a big row over it.

'Listen, Bharama! This cauldron your daughter has touched cannot enter our house. You take it away but not for free, mind you. It's worth 200 rupees. Tell me what you will do about it. Either pay cash or work till it's all paid,' the gowdathi had ordered him.

Not able to put together 200 rupees, Bharama had agreed to work as a bonded labourer. He was actually happy, it was as though he had come upon a fortune. His daughter had got the cauldron she loved so much. He was willing to do anything for that. He consoled his wife who stood looking downcast: 'The child got what she wanted. Working in gowda's house is nothing new to me. Would we have been able to fulfil the child's wish any other way? God has granted us a boon in this manner. Let's take care of the cauldron like we do our child.'

Bharamappa left home saying this and returned as a corpse. He had climbed a tamarind tree to pick its tender leaves, lost balance and crashed down. His head hit the stone below, killing him on the spot. Shivamma always cared for the cauldron with all her life and love, since she believed that the soul of her father, who had died for it, stayed somewhere in it. She hugged the cauldron and shed tears whenever her heart grew heavy with the memory of her father.

Gowramma too died six months after Bharamappa and Shivamma was left all alone. But Garuda did not abandon her. He took charge of Shivamma and even got her married to a distant relative. The boy had a house of his own, though he only worked as a coolie. Shivamma's husband was a dandy. He was not inclined to hard work and spent all his time and energy trying to woo the women coolies who worked with him. This made the soft-natured Shivamma feel helpless and lost. There were two children to look after too.

The first one was Sanjeeva and, after him, Gangavva. Sanjeeva was a serious boy, intelligent beyond his age. Noticing this, Shivamma had put him in a school. Teacher Hotteppanahalli Siddappa had spotted him and told his mother never to pull him out of school. He would one day be a big man, the teacher said, as though he had a vision of the future. She had then made up her mind never to be cowed down by any circumstance. She would work hard and educate her son, come what may.

Fearing that her husband's influence might affect her son's education, she had summoned Garuda and begged him to put him in a good school elsewhere and promised

to arrange for the money somehow. Garuda took him away as she had wished. Shivamma worked hard day and night. She would run for work whenever someone called and put together money in small change.

Her husband, meanwhile, had become a drunkard and harassed her every day for money. She would give him whatever she could afford so that he made no scene before their young daughter. He would not let her be if she didn't pay. 'Why do we need such a big cauldron, let's sell it …,' he would start demanding. To avoid this line of argument she would even starve and give him money. She had lost count of days when she had no more than water to fill her tummy.

Once in a while, she visited her son in Muttenahatti, carrying food like tambittunde, roti and pounded kharadindi for him. Her mind had got used to working like a bullock in harness but her body sometimes resisted. She once fell ill a whole week. Her husband didn't give a damn. Though her daughter brought in some money doing daily wage work here and there, it was hardly enough. He persisted with his demand for money. She begged and pleaded with him to hold on for just a day and promised to go to work the next morning and get him money. But he simply emptied the cauldron in the corner and started walking away with it.

That was when all the fury, wherever it was, had come gushing out of her. She had blocked his way with a sickle in the hand, screeching 'Eeyy!' A terrified Basappa had beaten a hasty retreat. This face of his wife was all new to him. She was forever the picture of patience and had never raised her voice against anyone. But she had turned a warrior demon-goddess that day and hollered, grinding her teeth: 'Take one more step and I will slice you into two … You don't deserve to even touch that cauldron. You, chandala, have polluted it by touching it now! Keep it right where and how it was, or else …'

Her fury was doubly dreadful because her face was darkened by fever, hair dishevelled and body trembling. Though he ran right back and kept the cauldron where it was, she continued to glare at him, her anger unabated, standing in the same posture. Basappa had slowly slunk away, as if he could not bear her gaze. Shivamma had never seen him again. And she felt no remorse. It was as if the relationship had served its time and was now over.

The daughter, who had watched it all, once asked her, 'Avva, what's the big thing about that cauldron really?'

Shivamma had hugged the daughter to her chest and said: 'Gangavva, hug the cauldron once like I am hugging you now. It breathes like you do. It beats dabadaba just as your heart does. It blesses you with its hand on your head just as I do. It will wipe your tears and give you solace when you cry …'

As she had gone on as if in a trance, Gangavva had freed herself from the mother's grip and said, 'Ey, stop it, Avva, you talk like a child … Get up. Have your meal and sleep …'

Shivamma felt as if an unbearable pain had filled her body, shook her daughter and flung her away.

Not even a drop of water had gone down her throat that day. Nobody had ever understood her feelings. So she never mentioned the cauldron when she had got her daughter married and sent her to her husband's home. The wish that her daughter should cherish the cauldron just as she had cherished it had dried up that day. She even felt a sense of relief when she thought about it. For where did she have the strength to live without the cauldron?

It was the breath of her parents, still glimmering inside the cauldron that had given her sustenance in all those years of loneliness after her marriage. It had given her the strength to get used to a life of struggle and the confidence to live despite all hardships. What showed on Shivamma's face as she bid goodbye to her daughter after her marriage was a look of fulfilment at having done her duty, rather than the grief of separation. She wore the same expression when her son finished his studies, got a job, got married to a girl from the town and went away to live in the house of his in-laws.

Her son had shrunk with guilt when she blessed him saying, 'Be happy wherever you are. Adjust to the situation there and be content with whatever you get …'

He had replied, 'You too come there, Mother, let's all be together.'

But his wife Jayashree, who stood next to him, just nodded and smiled.

Shivamma smiled too, stroked her head, and said, 'Be happy.'

The son had gone away saying, 'Don't go for any coolie work from now on. I will send you money every month.' He kept his word. But she hardly spent any of it. That apart, Garuda had joined her from Muttenahatti with his entire family. Her son continued to send money, no matter how much she told him not to, and it kept collecting at the bottom of Shivamma's trunk. An ache in her stomach started bothering her just as everything seemed settled and she had just about begun to breathe easy.

It was the kind of tummy ache that wouldn't yield to any medicine. It tired Shivamma out. Her son and daughter arrived one night with their families. Plans were afoot to transport her to town. Sanjeeva had brought a car. It was decided that they would leave the very next morning. Shivamma was lying in pain in the front room, her eyes closed. Sanjeeva, his wife, Gangavva and her husband were talking in the front yard. The conversation, which started with Shivamma's illness, had progressed to the shining cauldron in the corner.

Jayashree said that she had been eyeing it from day one and it would be a great showpiece in her collection of antiques back home. Though both Sanjeeva and Gangavva tried to tell her that it was best to let the topic of the cauldron be, Jayashree had gone on about it. Her logic was that the mother-in-law hardly had any use for it now and it would at least win a few praises for her back in town.

Gangavva finally came to agree with her sister-in-law. 'Yes, Anna, she has a point. Who will store drinking water in it in this age? Avvayya had nothing else to do those days. She spent hours scrubbing it every day … It sparkles only if you scrub it every day. Can you do that?' she had turned to her sister-in-law and asked.

'Oh my god! I can't possibly do any of that. So I have thought of a plan. How about getting it painted?' she had asked.

'Great idea, that will give a great look to your living room,' Gangavva had said with enthusiasm.

But Sanjeeva had not agreed. 'Look, Avvayya will never agree to give it away. It is very precious to her,' he had said.

This had made his wife furious. 'Why do you make such a fuss over what's after all an old cauldron? How precious is it now, tell me—more than the money you sent her every month?'

Sanjeeva stopped her as her voice rose. 'All right. If it is just the cauldron you want, I will ask Garuda mama to tie it to the top of the car tomorrow. Let's take it, come what may. Now let's go and sleep. We have to leave early tomorrow morning,' he had said, taking everyone back into the house.

Shivamma's bed was empty when they all woke up the next morning. The car was already parked outside. They looked for Shivamma everywhere in panic and finally found her sitting in the corner of the kitchen, hugging the cauldron with her chin resting on it. Next to her was the black trunk. Sanjeeva tried to wake her but found her immovable. She was calm, free of all pains and attachments. She had the glow of a child on her face. There were many currency notes in the box next to her and with it a few letters, all that Sanjeeva had sent her mother every month.

'My sister never spent a paisa from the money you sent her. She kept it all in this just as you had sent it. She had told me to return it all to you when she died. She has also kept aside a little money for her burial and other rituals,' said Garuda, opening a little cloth bundle. Everyone looked too shocked to even cry; their faces had darkened. Clearly, Shivamma had heard all that they had said the previous night. Sanjeeva was distraught. Could he ever face himself again? He covered his face with both his hands and sank down, crying, 'Avvaaa …'

Du Saraswathi

This poet, theatre person and activist among women street sweepers, is a second-generation dalit intellectual in more senses than one. Her father, A.G. Durgappa was a deputy registrar of cooperative societies in Karnataka.She was born in 1963 in Bellary but soon moved to Bangalore, where the family lived a comfortable middle-class life. 'As a child, I did not experience either poverty or atrocity. I had caring parents and a peaceful life. My father, who had been welcomed like a son into my mother's family, deeply respected his wife. Until class seven, I did not know my caste, let alone that I was a madiga. My brother, influenced by B.T. Jahnavi's father, became an eye specialist. It was not easy for people to identify our caste.' Only much later, when she went with her seventy-five-year-old father to his village, did she get a feel of how bitter his childhood had been. His people were leather workers; they were required to cart away dead animals; they ate the meat and processed the skin. Every second house in their area had a daughter who had been made into a basavi.[1]

The critical moment for Saraswathi came at a meeting at MES College in Bangalore where she studied during 1979–83. 'Siddalingaiah spoke and Janardhan (Jenni) sang. That day, I decided I would speak publicly about my caste.' She supported the DSS, which she saw as the instrument that gave self-respect to every dalit in Karnataka. 'One can say that the writings inspired by the DSS are the most important ones in the history of Kannada literature. The movement in Karnataka, though influenced by politics in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, is different. It is not radical (although in the early days it was sympathetic to the Marxist–Leninist ideology). You will find that though the focus is on caste and the idea of a casteless society, many of the writers are extremely gender-sensitive. They are different: open, direct, passionate.'

As a student, she also became involved in the feminist movement and participated in the activities of Vimochana. In 1985, she began working for the well-known Kannada feminist journal, *Manasa*. She was part of their cultural troupe, wrote for the journal and helped raise money for it. 'I began by writing "gap-filling" pieces, but soon moved on to writing on social issues, the economic reforms, women's health and nuclear weapons.' In 1990, she worked with contract labour, fighting for minimum wages, and then, around 1998–99, moved into working seriously with women street sweepers. She was an active member of the high court–appointed team that in 2011 submitted a report —which focused, importantly, on manual scavenging—following a PIL on manhole

deaths. The short story 'Bachchisu' is set in the context of the work with municipal street sweepers. 'This work with the safaikaramchari is far more important to me than being a writer,' she says.

Her life as a writer began with the diaries she maintained while in college. In 1997, she submitted a collection of (handwritten) poems for an award, which she received. The collection was published in the same year with the title *Henedare Jadanante* (Weave Like a Spider). 'Suddenly I was a poet.' Around this time, Saraswathi also developed a series of satirical performances featuring 'Santhinni', a witty, irreverent, labouring village woman. This character just 'jumped out', Saraswathi recalls, during the discussion that raged amongst feminists, some of whom called for a boycott of the 1996 Miss World contest that was to be held in Bangalore. Santhinni began commenting on the beauty pageant and the discussions. 'Later, I found she had a point of view on nuclear power, war, energy, 33 per cent reservations for women, and many other issues.' Middle-class activists practise a 'cerebral arrogance', Saraswathi explains. 'There is no give and take between them and the people they were working with on intellectual issues. It might surprise you, but women sweepers can grasp *all* concepts. They have their concepts of beauty, philosophy, the good life, even God. Siddalingaiah's Ph.D thesis is about their concept of God. Dalits in villages scream out to, yell at, hug, their deities.'

Saraswathi has also written articles on many different public issues for *Manasa* and co-authored a play, *Rekke Kattuvira* [Will You Tie Wings for Us?], that has been performed over eighty times all over Karnataka. She has edited a book for Bijapur Women's University on the skill, knowledge, labour and aesthetics of food. It is based on thirty interviews of women from various districts of Karnataka. Being both dalit and feminist has meant that she has had to face difficult questions about casteism and patriarchy. 'It took a while for dalit writers to recognize me. Initially, I think they felt I was too feminist,' she says, adding, 'Critics have charged me with not revising what I write. To revise and adorn one's writing, one needs detachment; that is difficult for me, and I am also suspicious of that tendency. I am not a student of literature. I want my writing to be truthful, not beautiful. For me, writing is a kind of release. My poetry is probing, vertical; the prose horizontal, descriptive.'

She tells us that there are some deep questions churning within her. 'The answers to these, I feel, I cannot find in social movements. Movements are important, but they cannot address the more spiritual questions.' Much of her writing, she says, comes out of this churning and is very concentrated. 'My mother,' Saraswathi explains, 'is the source of this ethical passion. When she died—I was only twenty-three—I felt orphaned. She is the one who introduced me to Marxism, taught me about humanism. Over the last few years, I have become interested in Buddhism. Feminism and Marxism

teach us compassion for people. In Buddhism, rationality and compassion go together. The height of rationality and the height of compassion are one.'

Further, she says, 'I want to become more transparent, more honest. I am a person who cries, gets angry, shouts. I wanted to see only beauty. Buddhism has helped me wrestle with all that, to confront the fact that reality is both poison and nectar and also to look at the filth within me. It has given a new dimension to my feminism as well as my understanding of workers' issues. I believe Ambedkar also found real solace in Buddhism. If he had lived longer after his conversion, he would have given a new dimension to politics.'

Her 2009 story, 'Bachchisu' (Tip), and the title poem from *Jeeva Sampige* (Tree of Life, 2006) are translated here.

Tip

Translated by Du Saraswathi and Radha Arun

Narasimha woke late. He was usually an early riser but he had been utterly exhausted by the previous day's work. The 'Festival of Bengaluru' had generated a huge amount of garbage and multiplied the sweeping tasks. So today he slept till afternoon. Rising at two, he ate the ragi mudde that had been kept aside for him and started for the market, to look for coolie work.

'Appa', his much-loved daughter Lakshmi called out as he was leaving,

'Yes dear?'

'Appa, give me some money if you have any. I have some myself and put together it should be enough for half a kilo of mutton, which I can cook for dinner.'

Tears rose to Narasimha's eyes as he looked at his pregnant daughter filling up the doorway. He had brought her back to this home a week back. Since then, let alone mutton, not even jaggery had been placed on top of the rice. 'Fuck this bloody poverty …'

Seeing her father's eyes well up, Lakshmi said, 'It's alright, forget it, Appa …'

'No, no! Pregnant daughter at home and I haven't even asked what she would like to eat, so I was feeling bad …' He dug into both pockets and produced forty rupees in all, which he gave to her saying, 'Here, don't waste your money; buy only a little meat, just

enough for yourself, and cook it. The Marnami festival will soon be here; we'll buy more meat at that time.' And he left.

'It's not for me,' Lakshmi was about to say. But she bit her tongue and held back her words, since she wanted it to be a surprise. Instead she called after him, 'Appa, I will get half a kilo of mutton and make a curry to eat with the ragi mudde. Make sure you come home early, so that you can eat it hot.'

Moved by her warm words, Narasimha turned back, brushed both hands against her cheeks and then cracked his fingers to ward off the evil eye. 'I must have been in your womb in a previous birth,' he said.

'Appa is always Appa. I must tell Maama [her husband] to settle down here. Back where we live now, there is not even a palm-size bit of land and no coolie work because there has been no rain.' Lost in these thoughts, she picked up a bag, fastened the door and started for the mutton shop. 'It is winter. I should not buy sheep's mutton, which is cold food. Amma leaves for work early in the morning when it is still chilly. I'll buy goat's meat, cook it nicely and serve it to her hot. Poor Amma. God did not write happiness onto her forehead. She leaves at five in the morning and is back only at seven in the evening.'

She bought half a kilo of goat's meat from the mutton shop. Then she picked up some ginger and coriander from a 'petti' shop, and bits of coconut and some gram dal from Kaka's shop. Then she walked back home, cut the meat into small pieces and washed it with water into which she had mixed a little turmeric powder. She lit the kerosene stove and heated groundnut oil in a vessel. Then she added some sliced onion and the pounded garlic and ginger paste to the hot oil and stirred it as it sizzled. Mixing the meat into this, she added the coriander and chilli powders and covered the pan with a plate. As the meat cooked, she washed the grinding stone clean and ground a mixture of coconut, gram, coriander, bay leaves, garlic and ginger into a fine paste. 'This masala will make the meat really tasty; at least today Amma must eat her fill; she has not so much as touched the ragi mudde for three days,' thought Lakshmi.

Lakshmi knows very well what makes Amma go off food. As a little girl she used to regularly accompany her mother on the sweeping round, despite Amma's protests. Amma used to coax and pamper her so much to make her go to school. 'Sleep for some more time. Yanktajji grandma next door will wake you up. Wash your face and ask her to comb your hair. Eat the rice left over from last night and then go to school'. So went Anjinamma's daily morning chant. But Lakshmi ignored her advice. Fond of sleeping on Amma's tummy, she would know when Amma woke, and would rise with her. She did not like to be left alone at home. Deaf to Amma's instructions, she would follow her everywhere. If her mother insisted she should stay at home, she would cry at the top of her voice. Sometimes Amma would scream in frustration, 'I have swept roads with you

in my tummy and when you were a baby, I kept you by the roadside as I swept. No wonder you can think of nothing but the broom. God has written your destiny too on the broomstick. No school in your fate …' Yet, though she took Lakshmi with her, she never let her touch the broom. In warm weather, she left the child to play under a tree while she worked. Sometimes her father would make a rope swing with a folded gunny bag for a seat for Lakshmi to play. After the sweeping round, he would go to the market for coolie work and Amma had jobs in two houses nearby, where she cleaned the pots and pans, washed clothes, and swept and mopped the floors. Lakshmi often followed her to these houses and her mother fed her all the leftover food that she had been given. Sometimes she went with her father to the market, where she would get carrots to nibble on and sometimes a fruit or two. Appa would search out the best in the waste and wipe it clean on his shoulder cloth before he gave it to her. Lakshmi chuckled to herself remembering what her husband had said: 'You have grown up eating fine food in the city. You are like a pure-bred jersey cow!' Let him come here, she smiled, and I shall call him a 'skeleton bull from the drought area' and pull his nose! She added salt to the vessel on the stove. The mouth-watering aroma of meat cooking with garlic and onion rose warm from the pot.

Then with the edge of her palm she scraped together the ground masala on the stone, poured a little water on the surface and scraped again to make sure nothing was wasted and collected that too. She added the masala to the meat. 'The aroma of this should make Amma eat a bellyful,' she thought. But when will her life be free of those brooms? Whenever Amma lifted stinking dead cats and dogs, she would stop eating for two or three days. She was able only to drink coffee, tea, or a thin gruel. She would not touch solid food.

After the masala paste was added, the aroma of the cooking meat filled the house. Appa will sniff it and say, 'Just smelling this makes me hungry. If I sit down, I will put away nothing less than a couple of mudde.' Whatever I make smells good to him. But Amma's cooking is much tastier than mine. She is so good at whatever she does. I must tell her to make dry fish with fried avarekalu. Though she doesn't like the strong smell of fish, she will not mind cooking it for me. Once again Lakshmi reflected: 'By God's grace if something works out, Maama and I can settle here. It will be good for Amma and Appa too.'

*

At that very moment Anjinamma was trying to pull all her strength together to push a cart with four plastic drums full of garbage, up a slope. The garbage lorry stood at the roadside on top of the incline. Her shoulders were exhausted; her thighs shivering. When she finally got up to the lorry, she asked Obalesu, who was waiting on the back of

the lorry, to lift the drums and empty the garbage into it. Then she sat down under a roadside tree to rest a bit.

Anjinamma is always neatly dressed. She pulls her hair back into a tight bun and holds it in place with hairpins. Not a single strand ever falls on her face. The pallu of her sari is tucked tight into the waist so that it does not flap around while she is sweeping. To make sure the sari always stays in place she ties her underskirt tight. Over her sari she wears a green coat with the inscription 'Swacha Bengaluru'. The coat is always fully buttoned up. Whether she is sweeping roads, cleaning gutters, lifting garbage or pulling out weeds, she manages never to soil her clothes. And her work too is always perfectly neat. That's why the people in the houses call her for domestic work. Anjinamma is small-built, and her face generally expressionless, but when she smiles, her face lights up and is transformed. She stands straight, one hand always held behind her. Her speech is direct and forceful like an arrow. It is only when she speaks that one gets a sense of the indomitable spirit in that petite body.

Anjinamma, along with others, had worked at clearing the wilderness as part of the development of a well-laid-out residential extension named Vidyanagar, which had come up in the area earlier called Sannathimmenahalli. It had been full of thorny and poisonous weeds, anthills, mounds and ditches, itchy 'congress grass' [parthenium weed], snakes and a huge variety of insects when she had joined the group clearing this area ten or twelve years ago. Her salary was just 300 rupees a month. When contractors had come to the Kullappa Palya slum to recruit people for this work, they had promised the workers that they would eventually get permanent jobs under the Bangalore City Corporation. The Narasimha– Anjinamma couple had been among many who joined eagerly in the hope of permanent jobs. Twelve years later, the chant changed to 'now contract, later permanent'. Through the fishing rod of contract and the worm of a permanent job, the contractors hooked the fish of profits in the waters of these innocent peoples' sweat. The contractors led a cosy, golden life, while the lives of poor workers burnt up like coal.

As they pulled out the heavy undergrowth to clear the land, the workers never knew whether what their hands would next touch would be a snake or a pile of shit. Unafraid of the snake, unshaken by the shit, they worked at clearing the scrub and levelling the pits and mounds. The land was developed into a posh housing area but the lives of the workers remained unchanged. Even this drudgery did not kill Anjinamma's spirit. If unquestioning faith is the essence of devotion, one can call Anjinamma the perfect devotee, worthy of any place of God.

Wages never flowed as fast as the workers' sweat flowed. Moving upwards slowly, the wage level had reached a thousand rupees a month and remained stuck there. Comrade Unnikrishnan had been tirelessly telling the workers that, according to the law,

they should get a minimum wage of 1,800 rupees as well as gum boots, gloves, mask, retirement security by way of PF and medical care under ESI. 'The *owners*[2] are thugs,' he keeps saying, 'they give Rs 1,000 to you and get your thumbprint, while in the books maintained for the corporation they show it as 1,500. They make a huge profit out of poor workers' blood and lead a five-star lifestyle. You should all learn to read and to write and protect your rights.' Unnikrishnan is 'sameru' (lord) for Anjinamma, though he insists on being addressed as comrade. Anjinamma is as faithful to the struggle as she is to her god. She who worked so sincerely had a mighty heart and an unbending spirit.

Sitting there, under the tree, tears began flowing from both her eyes though she was not crying. This had been happening for the past few months. The doctor who examined her said that her eyes required an operation, after which she should rest for two weeks and avoid dust and dirt. Recalling this, Anjinamma thought, 'The maistri who does not even allow us to eat breakfast and who shouts at us if we so much as set our bums on the ground even for a few seconds, will he give me leave for fifteen days? He speaks as if his boneless tongue wags without control. When Nanjamma asked for a new broom since the old one was worn out, he asked her to take off her sari and sweep with it! Couldn't he show some respect—for her age at least? If he ever says such things to me, I will scratch his face with the back of my broom. Taking leave for two days is enough for one to lose a job, how is it possible to get two weeks off? That too when, after what happened at the Ayudha Puja arathi, he is looking for opportunities to get his own back at me.' Anjinamma chuckled silently to herself recalling the episode.

'How hard we fought for the new salary! We went and met many big people many times, shouted hard in front of the corporation office. The commissioner said it would happen; the government passed the order for the new salary. The day named in the orders came and went, and so did many more, but there was no news of the new salary. Our footwear, legs, money, voice, everything had been worn out. It was intolerable. That's why I could not restrain myself when the inspector came round to check and burst out asking the owner, "What's this sami, our salary came to the court, to the Vidhana Soudha, and also to the corporation office, but we have not got it in our hands, we have not seen it with our eyes. It is not a favour that we are asking for, sami, we are only asking for the price of our sweat. You would be blessed if you give it to us, we shall light lamps in your name." The owner was infuriated and turned away as if someone had pushed chilli powder up his asshole.' Later on what a game he played to insult her!

The day after the incident, Anjinamma worried that she may lose the job. Instead, there was a message from the owner to get all the carts to the next ward to do Ayudha Puja and take bachchisu [a bonus or tip].

The workers were hopeful they would get the new salary also. When they arrived, all preparations for the puja were complete and the worship was about to begin. However,

they were not invited to join the puja or bring their carts for it. The owner watched them covertly with a cruel satisfaction in his eyes. When the arathi was done, once again the workers were ignored. Anjinamma quickly understood the insult and said to the others, 'Come, let's go back.' As they turned their carts to go back, the owner said in a loud voice, 'For lifting the garbage, they want the same salary as an office-goer. But just the word "bachchisu" made them come here sniffing like dogs,' and he spat. Anjinamma just swallowed the insult.

The next day she collected ten rupees from each worker and bought everything that was required for the puja. They washed their carts. They timed the puja itself for the owner's arrival and offered arathi to him. In his embarrassment, he found himself putting two hundred rupees on the arathi plate. He wanted to leave immediately. But before he left, Bagya offered him a small packet of sweets with fifty rupees tucked into the rubber band. He took it and was about to give it to the driver, when Anjinamma politely said, 'Please take the gift from us poor workers. It comes from hard-earned money. Take it home and give your wife and children. Let all of you be blessed.' Remembering the incident, Anjinamma wiped her tears. 'Because I don't cry,' she thought, 'God has given me this eye problem to remind me that eyes are for tears.'

Just then the maistri arrived. Seeing Anjinamma, he shouted, 'We don't pay you just to sit around. Get up and go to seventh road. Some dead thing there must be raising a stink; someone has complained.' She got up and went to seventh road without saying a word.

As soon as she turned into the road, the stink hit her nose. She quickly found the source. It was under the stone slab next to the gutter. She guessed how it had happened. The woman in the stone building buys buns to feed the street dogs. To escape from the big dogs, the little puppy has gone under the slab to eat his bun and had got stuck between the slabs and died. No way to remove it with the broom: it has to be lifted by hand. 'God has again snatched away two more days' of my food,' she said to herself, and slipped her hand into the hole. As the carcass had decomposed, it disintegrated as she tried to lift it, and only part of it came up in her hand. She shoved the slab to a side with the broom and pushed the rest of the carcass onto a plank; covered it with mud and threw it into the plastic garbage bin. The smell was nauseating. She went to the public tap, took her bit of soap from its hiding place and turned the tap open with her forearm to wash her hands. She washed them two-three times. Then she went to mark her attendance in the must,[3] and left for her round of domestic work. By the time she finished her work in the two houses, she was drained of all energy, physically and mentally. Dragging her aching legs, she slowly reached home.

Lakshmi was waiting on the doorstep. Seeing her mother, she said in happy excitement, 'Wash your hands and feet, Amma, there is hot water.' Even through her

fatigue Anjinamma felt: 'It is I who should be pampering her; instead here she is, looking after me.'

To assuage her guilt she murmured, 'Some avarekalu is lying in the kitchen. Tomorrow I shall come early; tell Appa to get dry fish, I'll make a tasty gravy of fish and avarekalu for you.'

'I will eat my belly full. For you, the smell will be enough!'

'It's all right, dear, a pregnant woman should eat what she desires.'

Lakshmi's heart overflowed with affection for her mother. She said, 'Amma, you can even have a bath if you like, I have heated enough water. I'll scrub your back for you.'

'I'll have a bath,' Anjinamma said, 'but there is no need to scrub my back. But if you make some tea, I'll drink it after my bath.'

It's time to eat and she wants tea, Lakshmi grumbled to herself. Not eating, drinking tea and coffee all the time has dried up her hunger. Let her bathe and come. I'll make her eat well today!

'Lachmu dear,' She heard her father calling outside and hurried out to greet him.

'Gently, dear, take care. I've brought some jalebi and khara for you. Is your cooking done?'

Lakshmi winked. 'Amma does not know.' Narasimha nodded and washed his face as Lakshmi poured the water for him. Anjinamma came out after her bath and asked for her tea. 'No tea for you, you have become like a dry stick,' Lakshmi scolded affectionately. 'You come and eat.' She served out meat gravy and ragi balls on three plates and took her mother by the hand and seated her before a plate. She smiled mischievously. 'Didn't your nose pick up the flavour?'

Filled with the stink of the dead dog, Anjinamma's nose could not feel the delicious aroma of the food that her daughter had cooked for her so affectionately.

'Taste and tell me how it is.' Lakshmi's face bloomed with happiness. Seeing this, Anjinamma tried. As her fingers touched the ragi ball she felt its texture; it was like the decomposed puppy that she had handled earlier in the day. Tears welled up in her eyes. They were real tears of grief this time.

Not understanding the tears, Lakshmi remarked, 'You must have that operation. I shall stay and take care of you. Eat, Amma, you won't enjoy the food if the ragi balls go cold.'

Narasimha was engrossed in his eating, silently appreciative of his daughter's tasty curry. Except for the bent head and the cracking sound of the bones he was chewing at, he could have been meditating.

The daughter was satiating the hunger of the big tummy.

Anjinamma got up for water. As she was taking water from the pot, some spilt on the floor. She looked for the cloth to wipe it. Observing this, Lakshmi commented, 'God has not written in your fate that you are to eat properly.' Before she could complete the sentence she felt a catch in her waist and the baby moving downward. Frightened, she shouted, 'Amma!'

Anjinamma went to her swiftly and held and consoled her. 'Don't be afraid. Looks as if the baby was just waiting to get a taste of the delicious meat before starting out. If you get pains twice more we shall go to the hospital.' Narasimha broke his meditation and ran to get Ramanji's auto. Lakshmi's pains came again, more frequent and intense. She held on to her mother tightly and let go of her only when taken to the labour room. Without much delay, Lakshmi's sampat [wealth] arrived in this world.

The newborn had only two fingers in the right hand and three in his left hand. Those fingers too were not properly formed. The doctor pronounced that a surgery could be performed after three months, which would remedy matters to the extent that the child would be able to use his hands. Silence fell on the room. His three listeners were in wordless agony like birds with arrows pierced through their chests. The child let out a loud wail as if to break the silence.

Anjinamma pulled the arrow out of her chest and spoke to the doctor. 'How much money would the operation require?' Narasimha, in the meantime, held the newborn against the warmth of his body and stroked his daughter's head gently.

After speaking with the doctor, Anjinamma came up to her daughter and seeing her pensive face said, 'You must not lose heart at misfortunes in life, Lakshmi. When God gives us good things, we take it with both hands; when he gives what is not so good, we must accept that too and never refuse it. When he gives difficulties, say to him, "You gave me this, now show me the way to deal with it." My dear, the child will be all right after the operation. Did you notice how active he is, how strong his voice was when he cried?'

Lakshmi replied, 'Amma I was not pensive; I was only recalling how much you tried to make me go to school, but I never heeded you; now there is no way but to send this child to school. You ask why? This child can only hold a pen in two fingers and never a broom. God has given this gift, why should I refuse?'

Tree of Life[4]

Translated by Deeptha Achar and K.S. Chitra

Behold! there,
deep in the netherworld is a
Jeeva Sampige tree.

To see
the seven
seven times seven
seventy-seven-crore high tree,
I climb down
lower, even lower, exhausting myself
crossing the cooling brook
as if intoxicated.
Facing the tree
with trembling body,
frightened mind,
crane the neck as one will,
the top remains out of sight.
Bend it! The bottom evades one too.
Before the eyes only
boulders that are
round
large
small
tiny.
An icy wind hits,
a shivering silence follows.
The tree has split the sky.
Its roots have drilled through and cracked the netherworld,
its rock-like branches are strewn on all sides.

How many ages have these branches lain there?
and how many years has this tree stood?

For how many aeons have these roots reached downwards
and these leaves fallen and sprouted afresh?
Through how many ages has the cutting cold of this water flown
and how many years has this shiver-inducing silence lingered?
For how many epochs has this soil that has embraced these roots existed
and the fragrance that has spread as flowers across the forest—
how many ages?

All your leaves,
every root,
stem, every bough and limb,
every fork of every bough—
Give me strength, I prayed,
to offer you obeisance.

O woman!
Your life is
the edge of tender, fresh-sprouted leaves and a bud.
Can the tender bud
comprehend the calculations of the aeons?
Who said so? Who laughed?

O Master Jade Madhi![5]
O Mistress Jade Madha!
Can it be she?
Can it be he?
A tree without gender?
Wandering, whirling
pulling, drawing,
gathering, splitting
her—
a spinning whirlpool.

Is it a boon? A curse?
Birth? Death? Life?

Cut down, she fell.
O Jade Madha,
I cannot battle you.

The life that you threw onto my lap
I offer back to you—
That fistful of
sweetness
coolness
fragrance
guarding warmth
steaming dark night
battlefield
sharp machete.

This life
That you have thrown at me—
will you make it a weight on the back
or will you rest it on my head?
It is up to you.
Even if there is nothing else,
dying
buried in the soil,
rotten, ripened,
whether for
the root that takes form
at this moment,
or for the tender shoots,
turn me into manure.

I cannot fight
my woman friend, Jade Madha.

B.M. Puttaiah

‘That day, my mother, Siddamma, had worked in the fields the whole day and returned home in the evening. It was after that that I was born,’ B.M. Puttaiah told us. That is all he knows about the day he was born, although as per the records, he was born on June 1, the day he was admitted to school in 1967. His father Manjayya and mother Siddamma were daily wage labourers. He was the youngest in a dalit family of six children. Manjayya belonged to a lineage that would get possessed by a goddess called ‘Holigini Chevudi’. When the goddess entered Manjayya, his body language would change and he spoke in a different language. Through Manjayya the goddess would answer people’s questions relating to ill health, drought, lost property, marriage and so on. People from eight villages used to consult him.

Puttaiah’s village, Basapura in Chikmagalur district, is part of the Malnad region of south Karnataka. The region is known for its beauty, its wealth and its feudal values and social hierarchies. Puttaiah told us that a strange disease attacked dalits in this particular region and stunted them. The physical dwarfing made their poor economic condition worse and life was very difficult. He remembers his childhood days when he could not afford a pair of chappals or clothes. His family did not have a mirror in the house. He used a mud pot with some water at the bottom as a mirror.

‘I took it as a challenge to overcome my inferiority complex. I began reading more and thinking differently. Even in high school, I had started reading books on Ambedkar, Periyar and Lohia, none of which were part of my syllabus. I attended DSS meetings and became an atheist. I developed a critical view of my village, rural society, feudal relations and the economic and social conditions in Malnad,’ Puttaiah told us, speaking with characteristic confidence. He was a very active student and participated in debating competitions in the eighth and ninth classes. More than the awards, he was interested in the prize money. Once, he won a cash prize of Rs 500. This was a big amount in the 1980s and he used it to support his studies and daily needs, he says. Puttaiah joined IDSG College in Chikmagalur for his graduate degree (1985–1990), but did not attend classes regularly because of the way one teacher treated him. Instead, he spent most of his time reading in the hostel and library. He realized that ‘what was written in the textbooks was a hoax’. These texts made no mention of village conditions, untouchability or social hierarchy. Even the teachers at this college were very traditional in their approach.

As a student, he came to be known for his debating skills and ability to sing bhava geete (poems set to music) and janapada geete (people's songs). He read widely in Kannada literature and trained himself in rational thinking. He also read the Telugu rationalist Tapi Dharmarao's writings in Kannada, as well as Bengali and Marathi novels that were available in translation. When he compared his reading with that of his teachers, he says, he felt very proud and stopped going to the college. He would read his textbooks only once for the final examinations. Puttaiah was involved in the public activity of the DSS in this phase. His wide reading and involvement in the movement expanded Puttaiah's vision and helped him overcome his inferiority complex.

In 1990, he joined the MA programme in Kannada in Kuvempu University. He was admitted in the general quota based on the high marks he received in his BA exams. The Kannada syllabus was progressive, as were some lecturers. Kesava Sharma (a Bandaya critic) and Srikanta Kudige (a Lohiaite) were his teachers. Puttaiah worked as a coordinator of the Dalit Students' Federation and conducted many agitations and programmes. These included protesting the problem of fluoride in drinking water, providing bus services, repairing roads and so on. Some students were arrested during this agitation. Up to 1990, Puttaiah worked with the DSS. Then he began working with CPI (ML) Red Flag. He criticizes the Maoists, calling them extremists. He argues that treating armed struggle as a primary form of struggle is anti-Marxist and that it is only meant to be the highest form of class struggle. 'After 1990, I was influenced by Engels, Marx and Mao. How to apply Marxism in Karnataka? My mode of thinking is not dalit. I am different from other thinkers,' he points out. His views on the introduction of English in the primary school and globalization illustrate this difference. There is a hidden agenda in the introduction of English—it is to eliminate children from downtrodden castes, rural and working-class backgrounds. More than 60 per cent of dalit children drop out from school and many fail in English in SSLC or PUC. This is partly the result of the current mode of teaching and partly because of the very structure of the education system. English is taught through writing and reading, but not through conversation and speaking. While it is important to learn English, the larger questions of teaching methods and inclusiveness need to be addressed, Puttaiah argues.

Puttaiah cleared his MA with a first rank. He was later admitted to the Ph.D programme on the basis of his proposal submission. Thus he became a Ph.D student in the first batch of Kannada University, Hampi. His dissertation on 'Kannada Dalit Literature and Counterculture' traces the counterculture tradition from Charvaka of pre-vedic times to the present. In 1993, he was selected as a lecturer in a junior college in Kudremukh. 'When Kannada University announced four temporary-lecturer posts in 1994, I got selected with no influence or godfather.' He boldly resigned his permanent post and joined Kannada University. What he was really attracted by was the freedom to read and write that the university would give him.

Now Puttaiah is associate professor at Kannada University, Hampi, where he has worked for eighteen years. He has written several articles, essays and books on pre-modern and modern Kannada literature and on dalit literature both in its print and oral forms. He argues that only printed writers are considered dalit writers and that this is a false view. He argues that wall writing, political demands, slogans and songs too constitute literature and that there is a vision even in a statement.

His important books include *Kadadu: Sahitya Sanskruti Vimarshe* (Stirrings: Literary and Cultural Criticism, 2008) and *Mukhamukhi: Samaja, Sanskruti, Cheluvali ani Vimarshe* (Dialogue: Society, Culture, Struggle and Criticism, 2008). As part of a UGC project, the book *Kannada Dalita Sahitya Mattu Karnatakada Dalita Horatagalu* (Kannada Dalit Literature and Karnataka Dalit Struggles) was completed in 2007. His university-sponsored projects include *Dalita Atmakathegala Adhyayana* (A Study of Dalit Autobiographies), *Atmakathegalalli Karnatakada Kathe* (The Story of Karnataka in Autobiographies). He has written fifty-four articles and participated in more than a hundred seminars.

Does Dalit Literature Need Poetics?

Translated by Nandini Hebbar

Elders and Friends,

Let me sketch the current political situation in Karnataka as a background to my argument. To prevent 'communal parties' from coming to power, the landlord political parties are trying to bring dalits, minorities and women into their fold. One may easily discount the 'communal parties' as 'anti-people'. But what about the people who term these parties communal? What are *their* class interests? The dalits and women of this earth may not think of a party as 'communal' in the same way. Despite this, dalits and women are being mobilized, sometimes forcibly, towards this end in many places. Landlord political parties that oppose 'communal' parties can be as harmful to dalits and women as the latter. Landlord parties do not have the same social concerns as women and dalits. If they oppose 'communal parties' and are mobilizing women and dalits to work against these parties, I am afraid it is only to serve their own class interests. However, they have advertised their concerns so convincingly that dalits and women have begun to believe that these concerns are their own. The questions that must be asked are: What constitutes the core of this enthusiasm to contest and oppose

communalism? What are the class interests that underlie it? What are its strategies? What are its tactics? These dimensions are not revealed. The urgent need ahead of us is to reveal them as a main and central part of our analysis.

Since yesterday, many papers have been presented and many discussions about 'Kannada Literary Poetics' have taken place. Papers on 'Dalit Literature' and 'Women's Literature' were scheduled for right at the end of this conference. This was not accidental. That the last session is allotted to these two topics at a conference such as this indicates the patronizing superiority with which traditionalists view such literatures. It also signifies that the traditional hierarchy will not give way so easily. Those who reflect on dalit and women's issues must take note of this. I suspect that the category 'Kannada Poetics' would provide better scope for a discussion of these issues than 'Indian Poetics'. When there's a common foe [in this case, Indian Poetics], internal issues are quickly overlooked and nullified. In the Kannada context, it's invariably criticism by dalits and women that takes a beating; therefore, to introduce it as a central question is an urgent academic requirement. First, this has to be made clear: if there's a 'Dalit Literary Poetics', it will not be a natural part of the category, '*Indian* Poetics'; it can never be that. It is more accurately a dissension in 'Kannada Literary Poetics'.

'Kannada Literary Poetics' is the theme of this conference. The papers presented thus far have all dealt with the central questions in literature, and the stand they have taken also shows that they subscribe to a certain ideology. Such work used to be just labelled 'literary criticism'. That led me to suspect that 'Kannada Literary Poetics' is also only literary criticism and that too of a specific ideological bent. This suspicion reminds me of strategies used by the capitalist market. When one brand of arrack does not sell well, it is sold under a different brand name or with a different packaging. The consumer buys the product looking at the cover, the label, its colour and the price. The market uses advertisements and media to strategize selling, though there is no change in the actual composition of the product. Advertising and media can induce the idea that the composition has changed. It's not a secret that advertisements make people believe what is not real. Let's now get back to the topic of literature. The worst-case scenario is that ordinary literary criticism has been presented as 'Kannada Literary Poetics' in order to get around the requirements of this market.

Dr K.V. Narayana once said about dalit literature, 'Either become burning coal yourself, or stand outside and watch it.' This is very important. Dalit literature—even merely speaking about dalit literature—carries with it the powerful, unbearable odour of burning chilli. Such formal forums, platforms and discourses forcibly mute this 'unnatural' acrid odour. They also forcibly remove the pungency from me and people like me and make us heat-less and powerless! Those who speak about dalit literature need to be aware of such constraints, since this is also a philosophical problem.

Responses to Dalit Literature:
Lament, 'Aha! Oho!' and its Hot/Acrid Source

Over the past three-and-a-half decades, dalit literature has been scrutinized and discussed from different angles. On the one hand, there has been amazement, relish, exclamations of 'aha!' 'oho!', plaudits and high regard. On the other, there has been intolerance, dissatisfaction, indifference, disdain, violence and brickbats. These reactions draw on various themes, perspectives, approaches and ideas of craftsmanship. The appraisal has taken two forms: dalit and non-dalit. Views have not remained constant, but have progressed with small changes. […]

Since yesterday, there has been debate on literary genres such as champu, vachana, shatpadi, ragale (different poetic forms), and literary movements such as Navodaya and the Progressive Movement in Kannada literature. No one discussed humanity. Only dalit and women's literatures raise that question. It has to be noted that the papers in this section are not so much about literature; they pose the issue of human relations in the social and political realms as the prime and central issue. This is not a case made by a lawyer quibbling over words. The political concerns forced into discussion by dalit and women's literature are at stake here. In the case of dalit literature, it makes no sense to set aside these concerns and wrangle over literary poetics. Here, living realities, the conditions that are eating up living people, are the focus. Their life gains precedence over literary issues. Does 'literature' have the ability or intent of registering or showcasing these things? This question has to be asked in a manner that supersedes the 'purity' of literature. It has to be asked in the way dalits rend their throats at protests. That is why it is ideologically difficult to talk about a poetics or present a literary poetics. In the final analysis, it is a fruitless task. 'Here! Take our muscles! Here! Take our flesh! Take! We have hot blood in our hearts'. Thus reads the blurb of Devanoora Mahadeva's collection of short stories, *Dyavanooru*. But what are these words trying to say? What is the significance of the word 'take'? It may be a response to the demand 'give'. But who asks this and why? The 'muscles, flesh, the hot blood of our hearts'—are they simply figures of speech? Or are they actual, cruel, social realities? Therefore, should we look at dalit literature only in the traditional sense that the word 'literature' carries? Should we set aside the physicality of muscle, flesh and blood and treat the words as 'a beautiful peacock that no hands can seize'[1], all the time exclaiming 'aha!' 'oho!' at the beauty of the work?

The song 'Wayfarers, go! Don't press me to sing a song; this is not a song, this is the sound of my heart burning' carries the same sentiment. The passers-by are urging him to sing a song. But he cannot sing because his heart is burning. Singing is not quite possible in the circumstances that they live in. Notice the verbs in the song—go, sing, press, burn. There's force on one side and a reaction to this force on the other in the

form of resistance. The reality of these two dimensions can also be viewed from another perspective. A burning heart cannot be conveyed in song to passers-by. Communication that uses neither language nor words is sharper and clearer—that is, the heart burning, the burning coal, the muscle, the flesh, the hot blood of the heart. Therefore, understanding the 'what' and the 'how much' that are expressed by language is child's play, a simple decision. Dalit literature is not merely letters of the alphabet, it is not something that can be expressed or understood as words or language. Dalit literature is not merely what is available in the library. Dalit writers aren't to be found in warm houses, reading rooms, air-conditioned rooms. What is called 'dalit literature' is not simply literature that has an ideology. […]

[To explain this] I will speak from the world of protest songs. This dalit literature is the story of wounds, wounds which contain a song of pain. [He cites a song.] Dalit literature is increasingly moving towards an idea of literature as a form of language and, that too, as expressed by the written word. In such a construction, the idea of 'literature' is bound down, restricted. Dalit literature is a complex phenomenon. It can broadly be understood as the comprehensive expression of dalit experience. It includes the songs sung at protests, in which the lead singer is no more important than the chorus. Slogans are also articulations of dalit resistance. Yet these have not been recognized as literature. Of course, such recognition is not of major concern for dalit literature. But on this platform we can raise a question and argue over it. Why has the corpus of over 200 protest songs and the compositions of over 180 singers not found place in academic discussion?

One literary critic has praised a dalit literary work as 'the power of poor people's laughter'. Another praised a literary piece written by a dalit as 'a peacock that no hands can seize'. These accolades and recognition by litterateurs and critics may initially appear to be serious literary criticism, but they are shallow because they hinder the understanding of this literature as the comprehensive articulation of dalits. Works of dalit literature are actually under attack by glowing statements like these, which turn dalit expression into something that floats around in an [abstract] world of aesthetics. This form of assault obstructs our looking at this literature within the existing social framework. It is important to recognize this danger.

Analyses or close readings of texts are the principal means of building a literary poetics. Language and structure are taken as the most important aspects of literature. The modes of analysis might differ from person to person but the works under consideration are works that are generally accepted as literature. In the case of dalit literature, the focus on canonical texts or accepted forms and definitions of literature is not adequate. The dimensions of the dalit world in the past thirty years, its interiors and exteriors, ups and downs, the injustices and crimes against dalits and their response or

resistance, must all feature in the discussion. In reality, dalit literature is the lamentation that arises out of dalit life, it is the woes of dalit life expressed in speech and writing. But in the sphere of literary criticism, in which beauty and pleasure are foregrounded, critics have praised it saying 'Aha!' 'Oho!' and have danced around it in exaltation. For the rulers, the tears of the poor are, after all, just rose water. Some traditional studies have made dalit literature their prey; others have made it a source [to affirm their theories].

In reality, dalit literature or any other literature is an expression of the collective pain of society; language is only a pretext. Letters of the alphabet and language have limited scope when it comes to articulating the extent of dalits' suffering, violence, injustice and pain. In dalit literature especially, these fundamental questions have primarily not been asked.

To whom is the question of dalit poetics addressed? Why? Who elaborates on it? Who has forced the birth of such a literary poetics? Whose interests does it fulfil? Is it in any way different from studies that have already been conducted? Or does it conform to existing notions of 'criticism' or 'research'? Also, what is dalit literature? What is its role? Is it confined to canonical texts? Does it include expressions that have no fixed textual form? How do we identify its role? What is its ideology? Is there a difference between this and an aesthetic that speaks about dalits? If so, what is its core? In society, are dalit communities a self-contained or separate unit? Will arguments that are taking place in the dalit world affect the ideological stances of dalit literature? Or do debates in the dalit world draw on dalit literature?

The Scope of Dalit Literature

Mention dalit literature and a readymade list of dalit authors and works come to mind. Writings on Buddhist thought are also often included. However, on the one side we have the literature that captures the desire, dreams, belief, agony, suffering, violence, humiliation, impatience, dissatisfaction, rage and resistance of dalits; the historical moment that saw the birth of DSS in Karnataka; the various agitations launched by the DSS, its programmes, growth, the numerous pamphlets, wall graffiti, banners, magazine articles that were produced, the 200-odd protest songs it gave rise to; the inspiring and efficacious speeches of B. Krishnappa, Siddalingaiah, Shivanna Kandegalu, Ashwath Antyaja, V. Nagaraj, R. Manasaiah, Tyagi, Mulluru Nagaraj; singers of protest songs such as Kolar Venkatesh, Pichchalli Srinivas, Col. Narayanaswamy, P. Velayudhan, R. Manasaiah, C. Dhanappa and others who have performed in many villages, who've played the dappu to the rhythm of the songs; those who have sung in the chorus; then there is the play about Patre Sangappa that has an impact similar to that of his brutal murder itself; research and study camps; jatre; protest marches, slogans shouted at those

marches; political party programmes; agitations for various causes; each issue of the newspaper *Panchama*; reports of the many strikes held by the DSS; proclamations made by newspapers; statements issued to the press by organizations; heartfelt talk between dalit activists about these issues; the words that were cooked up in the hot belly of the oppressor as reaction to the dalit talk.

On the other side, during the 1970s and '80s, international relations between India and the world, financial relations, production relations, the political growth of the ruling class, agricultural policies subordinated to the imperialism of the market, agricultural crises, the role of the World Bank, the IMF and FDI, NGOs that have been funded by imperialism to hide class oppositions and erase class struggles, capitalistic models that replaced feudalistic ones, dalits who rose to the call of the DSS and the strategies used by capitalism to overthrow the DSS—all these, I believe, are a totality that should come under the broad rubric of dalit literature. The complex, contradictory and dialectical relationship between these forces can be mapped thus:

Paradoxes and Complexities in Dalit Literature

- We have on the one side, treatment of dalits that would shock even our dalit brothers in Bendigeri [the town where in 1987 dalits were forced to eat shit], but at the other end, there's also the description of shit pits in Mogalli Ganesh's story *Bugari*, along with literary criticism on shit pits.
- The meekness with which unspeakable violence was borne in the village of Hangaravalli at one end, but also the courage of the character Gurusidhmava in *Kusumabale*, who resisted being beaten by people who organized themselves into shifts, and even met and drank tender coconut water before proceeding to attack.
- On the one side, there's *Odalala*, which portrays how Sakavva and her family get to the task with intense commitment when the police and Yethappa order them to 'capture the rooster and give it to us'; at the other end, there is the peacock that Puttagowri draws on the wall, one that 'no hands can seize'.
- One the one hand, an already canonized list of 'noted' dalit writers and works, and criticism based on them; on the other hand, over 180 dalit writers and over 200 protest songs.
- At one end, the lines of Siddalingaiah's protest song 'Our bones form the drapery on Doddagowda's doorway, our people's hands and legs are the pillars that hold up their cowshed' has been praised as using the utpreksha alankar [hyperbole], praise which is in itself a manifestation of feudalism. At the other, the tragedies in every street, the murders that rise out of the landlords' arrogance and villainy.
- Devanoora has said: 'Kuvempu and his *Malegalalli Madhumagalu* has inspired my writing'; and Siddalingaiah: 'Kuvempu and his poems have been an inspiration

for my writing'; on the other hand, . B. Krishnappa, in his critical writings, has said that Kuvempu portrayed dalits from a high perch outside dalit life.

- On the one hand, a protest song that dubs [former chief minister] Ramakrishna Hegde's rule as shit raj and Siddalingaiah's song that goes, 'We sing of the Queen of the Emergency, we sing of the poor', but on the other, works that are dedicated to the same Ramakrishna Hegde.
- On the one hand, a review that celebrates *Kusumabale* as a demotic epic; on the other, criticism that *Kusumabale* will be the post from which dalits will be hung.
- On the one side, there's the review that says that *Ooru, Keri* portrays 'the power of poor people's laughter', but on the other, there's the feudal assertion that lines such as '*Ikkrala Vadirla'* (Bash them! Kick them!, a song by Siddalingaiah, also translated in this volume) are not poetry at all.
- Then there's the call for reservation in the private sector that asserts that dalits will be emancipated because of globalization. There's also the grim situation in which this new imperialism has globalized the hunger of dalits and the insults against them.
- At one end is a poem by H. Govindaiah that praises the merits of the letters of the alphabet and formal education; at the other, protest songs that criticize formal education: 'You say Delhi! Delhi! Brother, but what is that Delhi to me?' by R. Manasaiah, as well as 'Student-brother, you take the path of fun and frolic, but I don't want that path' by C. Dhanappa.
- Channanna Walikar in his dirge, mourning the demise of Dr Ambedkar says, 'From the day after your passing, our life has not been the same. There is not one after you, who can work with the concern you had.' But Siddalingaiah's song goes: 'Breaker of golden shackles/ great Buddhist bhikshu/ why only lightning and illusion?/ Why have you not brought us rain?'[2]
- There's also the landlord song that counsels, 'Why this slavery to Marx, Siddalingu?/ Don't you understand, you're a man of Lohia?/ Don't remain a potted plant; grow roots and become a peepul tree.' As against that, we have Devanoora's short story, 'Moodala Seemeyalli, Kolegile Ityadi', in which a railway gangman, Siddappa, taking out his anger against the gowdas and the contractor by kicking the lamp post, thinks to himself, 'Communism should take over, only then will you know.'
- At one end, there's the DSS slogan, 'Forget your caste, build the nation,' and at the other, there's the Samata Sainik Dal [a madiga-focused organization] slogan, 'Forget your country, build your caste'.
- At one end, the DSS stance: 'Ambedkar is our vision, direction and path', while the DSS Coordination Committee stand is: 'Ambedkar inspires, while Marx shows us the way'.

- At one end, there's the demand: 'Dalits should be taught English from class I'. But R. Manasaiah's protest song declares, 'Even a suckling child goes out for wage work every day', and the song by C. Dhanappa asks, 'If you go to school, who will get you food?' and the terrible reality that that condition represents.
- 'The *Manudharmashastra* must be burnt,' says the opposition to formal brahminism, while 'Enough chicken and arrack served, dalits are waiting for their land' brings to the fore the demand for land as a fundamental concern.
- At one end, there's the spirit with which people adopt their caste names as last names as in 'Subbu Holeyar', 'Basappa Madar'; at the other, the hiding of caste names to secure a house on rent in the city and the use of dalit names [by the upper castes] to obtain caste certificates illegally, have houses allotted, or claim reservations in jobs.
- Studies give us insights into how revising the worship rituals of village deities can consciously but creatively subvert caste rules. However, across the land, dalits are not allowed entry into temples and are killed or assaulted during village festivals.
- At one end, terms such as 'brahminism', 'vedic' and 'priestly' serve as fuel for those riding on globalization and starting NGOs to oppose such things. There are also instances of dalit men marrying brahmin women; at the same time, the reality is that dalits are unable to marry into the non-brahmin 'middle' castes. If such an attempt is made, dalit colonies can suddenly fall prey to fire and dalit corpses may fall. This is represented in literary works such as *Kusumabale*, which portrays the way in which Chenna is secretly murdered.

These tensions and paradoxes are not a systematically prepared list. They only comprise an overview of dalit existence, achievements, the small steps that have supported it and the ways in which landlords have sabotaged dalit missions and used them to serve their own ends. If you understand the complexities above, you will know why it is difficult to propose a critical framework, let alone a poetics (a distant dream) that embodies the hunger in the hearts of the dalits, the insults heaped on them, the intolerance and the opposition they experience and also their dreams. The contradictions point to the cause behind these things—their relationship with the earth and production relations. They inform us that dalits have problems within the zamindari system and imperialistic regimes. They show that there's no opposition to dalit literature from landlords or brahmins. They clearly highlight that capitalism and democracy do not solve the problems of dalits.

Two Ways of Looking

There are two ways of looking at dalit groups: the bottom-up model and the top-down model. Currently, the top-down model occupies the vanguard. AHINDA [a coalition of

dalits, backward castes and minorities] and reform politics [as against revolutionary politics] use this model. When landlords and landowning powers meet dalits, they assume that this is what the politics of backwardness is. This model encounters dalits in star hotels, inspection bungalows, AC rooms in Bangalore, convent schools, and medical and engineering colleges. And the landlords and pro-landlord forces, who are part of such AHINDA mobilizations, who encounter the dalits in them assume that these are the only dalits and expect them to join with backward caste forces and believe that they will do so. Such landlord eyes don't see dalits that work as coolies, carrying dung or sweeping the streets. These dalits are purposely kept hidden and dalit writers are taken to hotels, made to sit on stages and told insane things such as: 'The backward castes should all unite in order to become the ruling class and all dalit groups should rise to the occasion.' The exploiters look at the dalits from the top, which suits their interests. In order to take care of dalit interests, it is essential to perceive dalits from the bottom-up. This can be clarified through a historical example: in the past thirty years, the DSS has organized protest movements, demanding land, in every corner of the region. Strangely, such protests have never been organized by the district or state committees. The call for land came from the homes of people in villages, who shared a relationship with the land, people in rural areas, people who had been victims of the injustices perpetrated by landlords. It is important to note that India's great Naxalbari movement was also not in response to some call from a central committee. It is important to stress this now because you cannot sample just a few dalit writings in order to get a sense of the whole body of dalit writing. There is no need for the dalit movement to prove that what scores of dalits have written is also poetry. If you engage in such an exercise, you will be unconsciously following the parameters of the opponents of dalit literature. It is better to ignore such arguments. Dalits must be viewed from below, through the eyes of those who labour and in their interests. They should not be seen only through the eyes of dalit leaders, writers and politicians.

Why Not Poetry?

A section of readers was alarmed by the language used by Siddalingaiah in *Holemadigara Hadu* (Songs of the Holeya and Madiga) and the literary discussion on *Kusumabale*. Traditional critics have said that Siddalingaiah's song, '*Ikkrala Vadirla*', is not poetry at all. However, that same literary criticism could not offer any model of 'what a poem should be'. Instead, it just said, '"Bash them! Kick them!" is not legitimate in poetic diction.' There were two reasons for this. One, since these are abuses, they violate the sanctity of Goddess Saraswati, the patron deity of art and learning. Two, such abuses and opposition become legitimized through letters of the alphabet, through writing and thereby get registered in history. It is something that will

remain for posterity. This kind of feudalistic attitude that assumes the authority to decide on everything, refused to acknowledge it as a poem. Despite this, that same poem inspired hundreds to write poetry. Hundreds of poems that share the spirit of '*Ikkrala Vadirla*' have been written. But the indifference shown to them by raving reviewers have expelled them from the frames of poetry or literature and rendered them untouchable. All the same, these historical issues, thus rendered untouchable, are central to dalit literature's understanding of society.

Education, Jobs, English—Historical Choices for Dalits

The fruits of the formation of the modern state are literacy, formal education and some jobs. Modern states have also initiated certain capitalistic reforms. Those who were economically and socially disadvantaged had to be given formal education and some ('some' must be stressed) jobs. Such initiatives did not have the well-being or emancipation of dalits at heart. Essentially, the imperialists had to be shown that dalit groups were giving capitalism and its handpicked government a grand welcome. That way, it tried to draw dalits into feudal relations and capitalist relations, while exploitation continued unchecked.

The modern state also needed to be called secular. Nowadays, literacy programmes are funded by the World Bank. The few who had benefited from formal education and jobs received an economic leap. But if we consider the total dalit population, this is only a very small number. Yet this small group has decided that formal education is a dalit's strength, knowledge and weapon of emancipation. This assessment was not based on a real appraisal of the contemporary dalit situation. It was based on a weak appraisal that said: historically we have been denied education or jobs, therefore what we need are jobs. The dalit writers who have hailed formal education and reservations are driven by a historical memory that is moulded in their competition with landowning and brahmin castes; they have not been inspired by the contemporary problems of dalits. It is from this position that they give importance to English and literacy. But how will English help dalits? What will it give them? Never in history were education, work or English the primary aspirations or objectives of dalits. As a result, dalits have become bound to a system that does not have a primary relationship with their lives.

The education thus given to dalits has invoked curiosity, astonishment, enthusiasm and a kind of delight in literate dalits who read dalit literature and in that section of the general reading public that reads dalit literature—some of whom have relished it. In these writings, dalits have expressed their community's joys, pains, problems, insults and sorrows. The extent to which the unveiling of the dalit world in language and art has been successful or unsuccessful comes to the fore in literary criticism [by these groups], which is actually dependent on the calculations of the market. In reality, dalit literature

should have caused shame and embarrassment [not aesthetic pleasure] to the class that caused the dalits' hunger and insult. But in the [academic] context of reading and critiquing dalit literature, the sociological and legal demands at the heart of the literature have remained abstract.

What is the Form of Dalit Expression?

Dalits who have overcome cruel circumstances and written about it have sometimes taken an ideological stance on capitalism and its philosophical framework. But they have also become isolated from the dalits' lived experiences. These disparate and conflicting histories are apparent in dalit literature. For example, let us assume that an educated dalit is still doing coolie work in the village that he was born and brought up in. A dalit literature that is valued in the academy will not spring out of him. Next, we will assume that the educated dalit has left his relatives, his village and settled in a city or town. He will be capable of creating what is called dalit literature. But this is not true of protest songs.

Dalits who have had an education make sense of their experiences only through that education. Those who are uneducated use their experience to understand the world, while the educated understand the world through received knowledge. Formal education has given rise to a wealth of material based on dalit memories. For dalit writers, their memory became a source of creativity. But through their writings, they separated themselves from dalits and also diminished themselves in the process. Education and jobs created a dalit middle class. Through this middle class, even capitalism was able to take root and expand. For example, Devanoora, who has portrayed immeasurable possibilities in his creative writing, organized a programme called 'Skip a meal, drink a sip of water' on 15 August 1985, when he was the convener of the DSS. This episode made him an object of much ridicule and was later used against him. This programme is as (in)famous in dalit history as his novels are famous in the literary world. What has to be noted here is that the notion of skipping a meal comes from outside the experience of a dalit. A true dalit would never think of fasting by choice because he has known starvation. His main anxiety comes from having to stay hungry, being forced to fast. This shows that within the DSS, writers such as Devanoora have neglected the primary angst of the dalits. The concerns and experience of those dalits whose stomachs are full have instead been brought to the fore. When dalit experiences are articulated in letters of the alphabet, it splits dalits' experiences from their existences.

From Reading to Speech

Often, dalit literature opposes silent reading through its form and structure. It begs to be read aloud in a full-throated voice. It carries the spirit of the oral traditions, if not visibly in language, then at least in essence. Protest songs are the best examples of this.

Odalala and *Kusumabale* are works of this kind. This quality is also present in Mogalli's prose. If it is written, it is also meant to be read. But the fact that this literature discourages reading and forces speech, and is essentially aimed at the listener, is an interesting feature. Reading is a method ideologically projected by the State, while speech stems from the body of people. Speech aims at and anticipates a listener, and demands an immediate response. Thus, it acquires a tangible character and is structured as dialogue. Even though writing can also be characterized thus, there is a difference. So, the tendency to oppose the silent reading of the written page is also in essence an opposition to the State. Let me explain it again—though the experiences of dalits may be manifest in written language, they resist silent reading and require to be read aloud. This dialectic is deeply rooted in dalit literature.

Dalit Readings

There's a stark difference between the way non-dalits and non-academic dalits respond to dalit literature. Non-academic dalits do not count what they produce as literature; to them, it is their very life that has been given tangible form. It is insulting for them to have someone lay open their 'deficiencies' and 'weaknesses', and that too in writing. The opposition from uneducated dalits to Malagatti's autobiography, which lays bare their 'deficiencies and bad qualities' can be seen in this perspective. The educated mind understands Malagatti's autobiography from the opposite perspective (i.e., it celebrates it).

Sakavva, in *Odalala*, dreams of ruling through her grandson. In *Kusumabale*, Nagaraju goes to the extent of tearing his tongue to correctly pronounce the word 'contradiction', while the uneducated Gurusidhmava just says 'oh, that word' as if he is familiar with it. This part of *Kusumabale* makes even Devanoora an object of ridicule. But we can also see how different forms of dalit literature deal with such things in different ways when we consider a protest song such as the one that goes: 'Say, say everything. Tell us *who* is the madman? Come, brother farmer, come brother coolie, come, tell …'

You can speak about the humiliation meted out to you only when you are able to escape from it, at least momentarily. While you are being humiliated, it is not possible to speak about it. As such, when experiences become less sharp and recede, they grow closer to being rendered in speech/writing. For those who undergo humiliation every day, having their experience captured in writing is a source of embarrassment. Those who are able to express the humiliation that they have undergone are the ones that have

overcome their embarrassment or are emerging from the experience. Those who study or do research on such expression simply view it in terms of sources, themes and forms. Both writers and the researchers focus on the question of 'social justice' in literature. But illiterate dalits know nothing about 'social justice' as a dimension of literature. Non-dalits imaginatively enter the problems of dalits through literature and suggest solutions to their imagined problems of dalits, while those who are in the thick of the problem seem to be rejecting such ways of understanding as well as the solutions offered.

Dalit Literature: for Study, for Discussion

The class that reads dalit literature as source material for literary studies celebrates its ability to rouse curiosity, to shock, surprise and delight. This class has re-represented, according to their (its) own sensibilities, the manholes, the urine, the lice, the peacock's picture, the groundnut shells burning in the fire, etc. This is the class that now delights in literature. This literature has been weighed in a balance that measures its aesthetic and artistic value, and feels happy about that.

We should pay attention to what K.V. Narayana has had to say about the critical discussion so far on *Odalala*: 'Folklorists are in search of the Yamadeva that Sakavva tells the story of, artists are in search of the peacock drawn by Puttagowri, literary critics are in search of the duptycommishner [deputy commissioner], revolutionaries are in search of Gurusiddha, who flashes the light from the clock in a dark world. All of them have failed. But the text stands. And Devanoora Mahadeva sits in the corner smoking a beedi, waiting for somebody to predict the future like Kurimayya does in the story.' In reality, dalit literature is not meant for such studies. It requires overwhelmed responses that pour out like the predictions of a fellow in a trance, like Kurimayya.

Dalit Struggle: Historical Aspirations and How They Were Derailed

Hidden Land Relations Shown as False: Anti-brahminism

It is true that dalit movements are the fruit of historical change; it is also true that they are a consequence of anguished dissatisfaction with the feudal system and the desire to break free. Further, dalit movements arose from the demands of workers asking for land, ruining the sleep of landlords. The lessons that the Andhra, Orissa and Bihar landlords received through the land struggles that took place in those areas were well known to the exploiting classes in Karnataka as well. When the DSS started up in Karnataka, the struggles in Maharashtra and Andhra had adjusted themselves to the existing hegemonies. It was the unstated, perhaps unconscious, desire of the landlord classes in Karnataka that the central agenda of the DSS should not be struggle for land.

However, the DSS could not but take up land as a major agenda. This political message was repeated over and over again in a series of protest songs that had spread from Telugu to Kannada during the 1970s. The only difference is that in Karnataka, the DSS sang those songs in a soporific stupor. Historically speaking, the exploitative system should have been completely destroyed by these movements, or it should have transformed them completely. For this, the DSS should have either taken the revolutionary road or struck a compromise with the landlords.

What is interesting, though, is the way in which the exploitative landowning classes historically dealt with these questions. K.S. Bhagavan, in *Shankaracharya Mattu Pratigamitana* (Shankaracharya and Reactionary Ideology), has explained it thus: 'Let us assume that a brahmin and a dalit are very poor. To make ends meet, the brahmin sits on the roadside and sells snacks such as chakkuli or vada. If the dalit decides to start a similar business, how many people will buy from him?' Even posing this question will horrify some people, who worry that it may become a reality! There is a need to understand the dangerous hypocrisy in this example. In this example, dalits are pitted against brahmins. It is trying to hide the fact that the landlord class is the ideological enemy of the dalits. In the above example, instead of bringing in a brahmin, it was possible to depict the opposition as one between the dalit and a person belonging to any of the middle castes. By positing the opposition as one with brahmins, the example hides the day-to-day atrocities committed by middle castes on dalits. Such hypocritical arguments have deceived dalit intellectuals and writers for the past thirty or forty years.

Positioned high on the exalted tenets of liberalism, dalit intellectuals and leaders turn their backs on the present and drink the poison of focusing only on the injustices committed by priests in the past. Abstract, intangible ideas, based on experiences not found in dalit colonies, have become reality in the ideological and critical literature of dalits.

'Brahmins, vedics and priests are your foes.' By quoting from the scriptures, a brahmin versus shudra ideological classification was devised, in which people belonging to none of the four varnas—the panchamas—were included in the shudra category. As a result, the cumulative anger against the feudal system in contemporary times was redirected against brahmins and the *Manudharmashastra*. In the ideological grip of liberal humanism, dalit intellectuals turned away from the present and began fighting the brahmins who had wronged us in history. Anti-brahminism, which is completely absent in dalit keris, can be found in dalit intellectual discourse and literary discussions.

NGOs have also been responsible for fanning this sentiment, purposely causing dalits to lose their way and even making a profit out of this argument. It has also brought joy to the landowning classes. They are the people who gift money [to their dalit workers] for

a daughter's wedding and keep the loan going for a lifetime. Those very people are happy when they project dalits and brahmins as foes. As part of the opposition against brahmins, dalits and other progressive people proudly conduct weddings without priests. But no one talks about the cruelty of landlords who give money for a wedding and then with their false accounts keep workers bonded to them as guarantee of repayment.

Feudal Status Versus Dalits' Secular Status

Dalit movements lost their way because they could not touch feudal production relations. That said, we should acknowledge that, for the first time in history, dalit movements did scar the social standing of feudalism. Democratic independence is growing with dalit movements and feudalism is gradually losing its hold. These two forces are now engaged in a social conflict. In the 1980s, the dalit community underwent a social transformation. The new generation of dalits began changing their first names. This was a silent revolution in the social history of Karnataka. It was not something that happened consciously. In villages, the 'middle castes' used to routinely corrupt dalit names from Manjaiah to Manja, Kalaiah to Kala, Thimmappa to Thimma, Kalamma to Kali and so on. There are adequate examples of this in Kuvempu's poetry. In Devanoora's 'Moodala Seemeyalli, Kolegile Ityadi', Raja complains: 'Mother! Ambu says he is not going to call me Raja but Gija.' This doesn't seem like a big problem to his mother, but Raja himself is very troubled by it. Suddenly, in dalit colonies and in the houses of landlords (where disparaging abbreviation of dalit names used to be common), names such as Ramesha, Ganesha, Kamala, Sudha became the norm. Since the names of the dalit labourers were the same as those living in the house, it was difficult to corrupt the names. This was a sharp insult to the feudal system.

Dalit Literature: the Problem of Language

Dalit literature has been impacted by the strategies used by the upper classes. Forms of language used by the exploitative classes are used. Some questions that have not been debated politically by dalits are included. For example, let's take the common saying, 'Dalits have been subjected to exploitation for centuries.' The saying includes the social action of exploitation. It also implies that there is someone who exploits, the exploiter, and someone who undergoes the exploitation, the exploited. But to the question, 'Who is responsible for this exploitation?', the exploiters will reply: the dalits themselves, while dalits will say the exploiters are. Look closely at the sentence quoted. The sentence makes it seem that dalits are somehow responsible for their own exploitation. The exploiters have not been named in the sentence. This means that the idiom, which is also used by dalits, is not really their own. It is that of the exploiters.

Dalits are using the language and idiom of the exploiters to articulate their own thoughts and ideas. Those who are able to perceive and understand the social power and impact of language find this a problem.

Is It Possible to Have a Poetics for Dalit Literature?

Dalit literature is popularly defined as the writings of famous dalit writers. But people are fast concluding that such fame is all there is to dalit literature. Some of the works in this limited list are on the syllabi of formal education courses. Others are recommended for academic reading and critical discussion. The same works appear again and again. Some works might have the power and tenacity to find a place repeatedly in discussions; that's a different thing. But my objection is that it is not possible to conceive of dalit literature in such narrow terms. Many dimensions of dalit literature, including literary and social dimensions, have been researched. It is studied under different rubrics, like proliferating brands in a market. Currently, the interest is in dalit poetics, and we have to wait and watch to see what the next brand is going to be. The irony is that whatever the name of the brand, the content of these studies remains the same. Brands are only a marketing strategy; we find no serious theoretical interest or real theoretical maturity in studies of this nature.

If we stubbornly continue to demand a poetics for dalit literature, we will be forced to focus on a few works by a few writers. Such a choice implicitly rejects a great number of works by a great number of writers. The state's education system and its curriculum will certainly encourage and support this method. But we shouldn't base our judgement on works that appear in the syllabus. On the contrary, we should actively look for those works that will be rejected by it. We have already argued that dalit literature is not to be found only in formal or printed forms. We should remember that here. At its heart, dalit literature rebelliously opposes any kind of hierarchy. In constructing a poetics, we should not forget that both inclusion and exclusion are in operation. Exclusionary practices, which also place literary texts, both written and oral, in a hierarchy, have no place in dalit literature.

We should be cautious about those critics who erase the real character, the strength, of dalit literature with their nourishing 'Ahas' and 'Ohos', and work towards revealing the actual vested social interests of those accolades.

Let us return to the thoughts with which this talk began. Those who are opposing 'communal political parties' and strategically trying to get dalits to join them are, in fact, serving their own interests. It would not be wise to join them. If we do, dalits will have to function as puppets in the hands of the landlords' political party. We cannot sacrifice dalit literature in this way. Dalit literature has its own socio-political interests

and has its own identity. It has its own socio-political aims, and its own sense of difference.

N.K. Hanumanthaiah

N.K. Hanumanthaiah was perhaps the most promising poet in the generation that began writing in the late 1990s. Two poetry collections—*Himada Hejje* (Footprints in the Snow, 1998) and *Chitrada Bennu* (The Reverse Side of the Portrait, 2006)—memoirs that tell of his journey from a tiny village to the city, papers he presented in seminars and the essays he published bear testimony to his versatile talent. Hanumanthaiah also wrote a few short stories and tried his hand at a play for children. His probing interviews with writers and thinkers were widely discussed, and his essays on dalit literature specifically and Kannada literature in general carried insightful analyses of literature and culture. He was a recipient of the GSS Kavya Prashasti award. He edited a little magazine titled *Ooru Keri*, which borrowed its title from the autobiography of the dalit poet Siddalingaiah—sadly, he managed to publish only a few issues of it before his death. Hanumanthaiah also wrote songs for a film that did not see the light of day.

Born in 1974 in Nagaraghatta, a village in Tumkur district, Hanumanthaiah lost his father at a very early age and was brought up by his mother who worked in the fields and in the households of local landlords. His schooling and college education was in and around Tiptur and Tumkur. He is said to have built up an image of being religious in his teens, smearing vibhuti on his forehead. Later, he took a conscious decision to put an end to this cultivated image.

He obtained an MA degree in Kannada from the PG Centre of Bangalore University in Tumkur, where he met Shailaja, his classmate and future wife. She belonged to the dominant lingayat caste and the marriage took place amidst resistance and threats from the girl's family. Though they were helped by friends, the couple struggled to survive economically. Hanumanthaiah taught Kannada literature at various colleges in Bangalore, Tiptur and Honnavar. He also pursued a doctoral degree on Kannada autobiographies.

Hanumanthaiah belonged to the younger generation of the dalit poets, many of whom were quite critical of the dalit movement. In a sense, he was more of an onlooker and commentator on the dalit movement than a participant. He was even sceptical of dalit organizations that were, in his view, dominated by the higher castes among dalits. It would also seem that he had made a conscious decision to stand aloof from the dalit movement to save his writing from the jargon of dalit poetry. A closer look at his poetry

suggests that the structure and the texture of his poetry was closer to the self-searching mode of Kannada Navya (Modernist) poetry rather than the familiar dalit mode. The way he recited his poems—as reflective soliloquy—was also different from that of other dalit poets, whose renderings were charged with rage and often set to music and sung. The poem, 'The one who ate the cow and became a cow', translated here with the title 'Untouchable, Yes, I am!' earned him a distinct place in dalit poetry, as did the title poem of one of his collections, 'Chitrada Bennu' [The Reverse Side of the Mirror]. In the first poem, he had hit upon an original metaphor and offered a new kind of resistance to those who were making a political and cultural issue out of beef eating. The narrator of his poem declares: 'I will eat the cow and turn into a cow.' In 'Chitrada Bennu', on the other hand, he is sceptical of his own perceptual frames and wonders if they are able to capture the truth at all.

Chitrada Bennu marked a new phase in the poet's career. The poems in the collection deal with different states—of loneliness, sadness, bitterness, the survival instinct, masochism and the violence that springs from relationships. The mother image, which made an appearance in his first collection, *Himada Hejje*, is present in the second collection in his images of the beloved and of woman in general. His autobiography records the horrific exploitation of his mother in his village.

During his career as a lecturer at Tiptur, he had to face the ire of the communal forces in a communalized mofussil town. He wrote a song, titled 'Heggana Nuggidavo' (The Bandicoots Have Rushed In), giving vent to his anger towards, and his apprehensions about, such communal forces and sang it out aloud to his students and friends. At times, his poetry suffered from an overdose of self-pity. In his later poetry, however, he was able to overcome this by presenting violent, universal images like 'slaughtered penises smeared with the saffron, white and green', 'me—hung upside down among the heads of the children in a butcher shop', or an expression of amazement: 'They are stuffing me into the very hole of the fort through which I had barged in.' One also comes across tender images, such as 'the child which has given birth to the evening on its lap'. But the poet does not pause for long in these moods as his tragic vision pushes his search beyond the sense of wonder at things beautiful.

N.K. Hanumanthaiah's writing is an exploration of the violence tha keeps recurring in society, between individuals, between man and woman, as well as the violence unleashed upon the world by feudal, communal and casteist forces. But it is the fact that he also looks within to trace the seeds of violence that sets him apart from most Kannada dalit poets. Much to the shock of the literary community, he committed suicide in 2010 for personal reasons.

Headnote written by Nataraj Huliyar

Mother and Sari

Translated by Ankur Betageri

That night,
hoping to dream a sweet dream
I slept swathed in the warmth
of mother's tattered sari.
When winter licked my body
I cried 'Avva …'
and snuggled into her lap.

Eating stale rice and payasa
from the feast at the gowda's wedding
my stomach began to rumble and
I shat on mother's clothes.
She covered me
with an old sari that someone
had washed and given her.

When mosquitoes kissed up
the blood of my shrunken body,
I whimpered and hugged Avva.
When my little legs
found their way inside through a tear
and touched her thighs,
she shuddered, remembering
father, who died drunk.

Once when the rain
dripped down from the eye of our hut,

I woke up.
Eating the hailstones
scattered in the middle room
one by one, I chuckled.
But mother cried
holding in her hand
a wet sari.

Untouchable! Yes, I Am

Translated by Ankur Betageri

Untouchable!
Yes; I'm like electricity,
inaccessible to your
cold touch.

Untouchable!
Yes; I'm like the depth of the ocean
not accessible to the touch
of your seething eyes.

Untouchable!
Yes; I'm the breast-impressed earth,
debauchee
of the skin, of love for life.
Forests and valleys, rivers and mountains
take birth in me.

Untouchable!
Yes; I do not fear

you faggots who indulge
in your own schemes.
I fear
the monkey which jumps from tree to tree
protecting the baby clung to its breast.

Untouchable!
Yes; I do not fear
the radiance of your eyes
which without tears and tomorrows
have become furnaces
of money and nuclear weapons.
I fear the dog which eats
your shit and guards your house.
Fake eyes don’t see dreams.

Untouchable!
Yes; I eat the cow
I eat the cow and am becoming like the cow.
I dance in the valleys and mountains
and plains;
standing on the land
I lift my tail and rap the rainbow,
I gore the rain and the clouds
and topple them over graveyards.

Untouchable!
Yes; I eat the cow.
I eat the cow and become cow-like.
I roam about
holding an udder in each hair
and feed the babies

thrown in the garbage dump.

Untouchable!
Yes; I am a man who became cow-like
after eating it.
I will not eat your fodder
and become a human like you;
I will not eat humans like you.

Elephants Melting in the Mouth of an Earthworm

Translated by Ankur Betageri

A sculptor
carved hundreds of
elephants and chariots
on a mustard seed
and twirled his moustache.

He began to laugh
at the legs and hands of time
which began to rot and fall
in front of the mustard seed.

A small bird
which flew from the electric wire
swallowed the mustard seed.

The sculptor collapsed;
when he opened his eyes
in front of him
was a mustard plant.

The elephants and chariots
which had fallen under it
were melting in the mouth
of an earthworm.

The Crab

Translated by Ankur Betageri

The fish swimming in glass-like water disappeared instantly
as they came under my shadow.

But the crab
sitting deep in the depths
of clear water
didn't feel my shadow;
angry, I got into the water
and holding the crab with two fingers
I pulled it out.

The legs,
stretching to slip into water,
I broke like sticks.

The legless body of the crab
wobbled,
like the hand of a child
it raised and lowered its eyes.

In my anger
I walked to the stove
and threw the crab into the flames.

The legless body of the crab
wobbled,
like the hand of a child,
it raised and lowered its eyes.

The Spring of Revolution: A Biography of Basavalingappa—Excerpts

Translated by V.S. Sreedhara

There lived a cloth merchant called Basappa in Nagara Betta village, Indi taluk, Bijapur district. He travelled from one place to another, selling cloth. But as his business declined, he moved to Kottur in Bellary district. It was here that his son, Basavalingappa, was born on 21 April 1928. As the boy grew up, the freedom struggle was heating up. When the 'Quit India' movement [1942] reached Chitradurga, Basavalingappa was a young boy and he participated in it with youthful zeal. It turned out to be an important event in his life and inspired him to take an active interest in the politics of social change and be involved in organizational work. He went to Mysore for his college education. It was here that he realized the complexities of the society he lived in and learnt of the revolutionary thoughts of Dr Ambedkar, whose voice was spreading like wildfire across the country.

India got freedom but its fruits did not reach the untouchables and the poor. In this context, Ambedkar's thoughts seemed to give shape to the struggle for a new kind of freedom, and deeply impressed Basavalingappa. He realized that it was necessary to break the religious, cultural and political ideology of the priestly class, which had strangled the lives of the poor. The caste system, entrenched as it was in this ideology, had no power to provide freedom to all. He gathered together students in Harihara, where he was studying for his degree, and began discussing literary, cultural and political issues with them in order to find a foothold for his creativity. This activity enabled him to learn the art of expressing what he truly felt clearly and fearlessly. He was convinced that intellectual pursuit and creative zeal were necessary to break out of slavery and become independent.

Basavalingappa felt that ignorance of the law was why his community continued to be exploited, prompting him to study law at Belgaum. It was during his days in law college that he also started reading Kannada and English literature seriously. He

returned to Harihara. Studying law had helped him overcome his inferiority complex and become fearless. He thought that he should use his knowledge for the welfare of the community. He had some free time as he had not yet started practising law and decided to visit dalit areas in nearby villages and persuade people to send their children to school. He cycled to a village called Rajanahalli and met the parents of several children—to little avail. Still Basavalingappa did not give up. He continued to cycle to the village every day, with the hope that he would succeed one day.

A village elder grew suspicious of him. He thought the young boy was after some girl and was visiting her secretly. One day he stopped Basavalingappa and asked him why he was visiting the village every day. Basavalingappa told him the story of how the dalits there had refused to educate their children. The old man asked him to go straight to him the next day, instead of visiting the dalit homes first.

Basavalingappa did as the village elder had instructed. As he was watching, the old man called out in a loud, gruff and authoritarian tone to the dalits who were on their way to work. 'Come back!' he shouted. His eyes were burning with anger. The terrified villagers gathered the courage to ask why they were being scolded.

Pointing his finger at Basavalingappa, he asked, 'Do you know this young man and why he is visiting your houses every day?'

'Yes, we do, my lord! He is pestering us to send our children to school. Why do we need all that?'

At this, the village elder became furious. He stood up and shouted at them, 'Nothing doing. Take this young man to your huts and listen to what he says. Otherwise let me see how you will live in this village!'

The dalits were stunned at the harshness in the landlord's voice. Without a word, they took Basavalingappa to their huts and listened to what he had to say. After that, the children began going to school. This incident persuaded the young man that social transformations could not be accomplished by organizing one's own community alone. It was necessary to bring progressive forces and humanitarian individuals together. The Russian and Chinese revolutions had given him some idea of the nature of social change. The Rajanahalli episode provided him with a base to set his revolutionary thoughts in motion.

[…]

Very soon, he understood that it was important to have power to bring social change. The strong fortifications of the caste system could be brought down only through political power, he was convinced. He set out to explore political possibilities and entered politics officially in 1949 and was elected member of Bangalore Town Municipal Council in 1950 as a Congress candidate. He turned his attention to the

problems of municipal labourers and worked to find solutions. The climate was abuzz with the call for the unification of Kannada-speaking people. Everywhere the mood was in favour of bringing together different literary, cultural and political elements. A committee was formed to work out the modalities of unification and Basavalingappa was nominated its principal secretary. This brought him in contact with N. Rachaiah, another dalit leader. Both toured the state of Karnataka, spreading ideas about social development and organizing dalit youth wherever they went. Their revolutionary and creative endeavours soon made them important dalit voices.

Basavalingappa believed that human beings should understand why their lives were in such a wretched state in order to break out and live with their heads held high among other members of the community. This could only be achieved through proper education, the pursuit of multiple streams of knowledge and revolutionary ideas. He was convinced that the revolution was a sign that there was life, and so it would be better to gallop like a wild horse than remain mute, burning quietly in the shameful fire of the caste system.

He first contested the MLA seat from Bijapur in 1962 and won and then went on to become home minister. Basavalingappa earned a reputation as an efficient, honest and taintless minister, feared equally by ravenous landlords and corrupt bureaucrats.

As home minister, he also recruited a large number of dalits, minorities and other backward community members into the police force, thus giving these communities courage and a much-needed sense of protection. His progressive stance and actions set the communal forces on edge. They feared that his ideas would shake the foundations of the caste system and consequently destroy the ancient Hindu dharma. This is why Basavalingappa lost the 1978 elections. But the defeat did not deter him from continuing his struggle.

Ambedkar had opened a hostel for the backward classes in 1929. It was one of the first steps he had taken for dalit emancipation. In 1929, he set up the People's Education Society. [In the late 1950s], Basavalingappa became the president of this hostel and in 1964, a trustee of the Society. The Maharaja of Mysore had sanctioned five acres of land to Ambedkar in Rajmahal Vilas extension in 1955 on his request. The place had been vacant since then. Basavalingappa got the land transferred to People's Education Society and started 'Nagasena College' in 1984. He named the place 'Buddha Bhumi'.

[…]

In the 1972 elections, the Indira Congress—which had split from the main party—won a sweeping majority. Devaraj Urs became the chief minister and he made Basavalingappa minister for town administration. This gave the latter an opportunity to tour the state and learn about the intricacies of our society from close quarters. He found to his horror that the practice of carrying night soil was rampant and that dalits were still subjected to this

inhuman labour. Basavalingappa discussed the issue with several progressive-minded people and with the government, the result of which was that the practice was finally banned and a Bill passed to that effect. It was twenty years after Basavalingappa's initiative that P.V. Narasimha Rao, as prime minister, got the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1992,' passed, prohibiting the horrible practice nationally.

Basavalingappa also took seriously Ambedkar's observation that urbanization would destroy the caste system. He introduced an 18 per cent reservation for dalits in the newly formed extensions to Karnataka's cities. However, his radicalism blew up in his face on 19 November 1973, when his speech created a storm in Kannada literary circles. The Dr Ambedkar School of Thought had organized a seminar on the topic of 'New Waves' in the Senate Hall, Mysore. Basavalingappa, who was the chief guest at the seminar, made this statement: 'Much of Kannada literature is cattle feed [boosa in Kannada].' These words struck the hall like lightning and spread like a tempest across the state. The roots of the Kannada literary world began to shake.

Excerpts from Basavalingappa's Speeches

'I submitted my resignation on 16 December [1973]. Since then, and to this date [some months later; date not available], there is a feeling of anger and revolutionary fervour everywhere, particularly among the youth. Wherever I go, I see young people engaged in a hot debate over whether what I said in Mysore was correct or not.

The people who were present at the meeting know whether I was right or wrong. But the conspiracy of the press, its alacrity in distorting my words is something I must admire. The distorted report got all this publicity. I now feel it was all for the good. I would like to personally thank the press for reporting the matter as they did. What was the effect? There has arisen a new thinking among the youth in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Maharashtra. This has made me very, very happy. What does it suggest? I feel it has renewed what Basava began in Basavakalyana long ago. Thousands of people coming together irrespective of caste or religious difference, resolving to bring change in society and in the way people think is a wonderful phenomenon.

That great soul Basava said long ago that caste should go. The result? He was murdered. Everyone who has tried to fight against the social system has met the same fate. I do not mean to say I am such a great man. I am an ordinary social activist. The one quality I know I possess is the ability to speak whatever I honestly feel. Whatever I feel I should do, I am doing. If my thoughts have created a churning in society, it is because of the stand I took and the way it has been acknowledged by the people. Nothing else …

Responses from Some Kannada Writers

K.V. Puttappa (Kuvempu)

There has been so much agitation over what Basavalingappa seems to have said … that all Kannada literature is cattle feed. It caused much trouble and even led to the fall of the ministry [sic]. It was a big political revolution. But it should be noted that every literature in the world has this fodder element to a great extent. In fact, nearly two-thirds of what we have is nothing but fodder literature.

What you call first-rate or great literature will constitute no more than a quarter of what is written. Those who keep cattle at home know very well that fodder is the main food. If they were to feed the cattle not with fodder, but with cotton or oil seeds, both the creatures and their owners will soon perish because no one can afford such food every day. Think! Do we eat sweets and payasam every day? Don't we eat rice? It is the same with literary works also.

Nearly three-fourths of all of world literature is nothing but cattle feed. It has to be! Even in ancient Kannada literature, we recognize only a handful of poets as great. Some seven to eight poets are considered capable. What the rest, thousands of them, write is all cattle feed! But calling their writing cattle feed does not mean we have shown them disrespect. To think like that is sheer foolishness. It is the function of criticism to evaluate literature as great, middle-range and mediocre. Even now, most of what is being written is nothing but cattle feed. Only a handful of them can be called 'cotton seed' or 'oil seed' literature.

Basavalingappa, of course, issued a clarification that he never called all Kannada literature cattle fodder. But no one cared. The issue was blown out of proportion and even distorted by some yellow papers. But why blame only these papers? The readers that are easily swayed by such yellow journalism also have yellow brains! One took the help of the other and each fed on the other.

Think about why Basavalingappa made such a statement. He had in mind the betterment of harijans. He meant that, viewed from the dalit perspective, there was not much in Kannada and hence it was cattle fodder. Of course, even in Kannada there are some works that are written with the betterment of dalits in mind, and these works are not cattle fodder. In his views, my own works like *Jalagaara* and *Sudra Tapasvi* (plays), *Kaanuru Heggadithi* and *Malegalalli Madumagalu* (novels) are not cattle fodder.

In some of my poems, I have gone miles beyond what Basavalingappa has said. One of my poems says:

Enough of shedding tears in front of dead stones

Now let us pray for life-giving mother.

This is more challenging than Basavalingappa's own call to throw God's photos into the gutters.

U.R. Ananthamurthy

I suggest that we organize an annual endowment lecture in the name of Basavalingappa. This should be done by the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti. In his time he was a great dalit leader, not just of our state but of the whole nation. We always talk about action. He was the first to take the concrete step of banning carrying of night soil by dalits on their heads. I still remember the big debate that went on at that time, the way people went to court against the order and how a representative of Indira Gandhi came from Delhi to plead the creation of a provision that would make it possible to carry night soil for just one hour. But Basavalingappa did not budge an inch. I feel it is a great achievement.

When there was severe opposition to Basavalingappa's statement on Kannada literature, I wrote to the papers supporting his stand. But not a single paper published it. Thereafter, when I was asked by the Lions Club to give a talk in Madikeri, I spoke about the issue. I know this way the papers would have to cover what I said. Even then, many editor friends advised me to keep away from this controversy. But I told them then, and continue to believe it even now, after twenty-five years, that Basavalingappa had said something new, something fresh that we need to consider …

It is but natural that one who has seen a lot of suffering would view literature that is full of community feelings as nothing but cattle feed. But at the same time, we cannot forget that the explosion and expansion of dalit consciousness ought to happen through the Kannada language. Hence, I cannot agree with him entirely. But he was a modernist. He believed that English would provide new ideas and bring about the liberation of dalits. There is a lot of truth in this. Revolutionary ideas and modernization can be really liberating. The advocates of urbanization always say that it is *only* through modernity and urbanization that dalits can find true liberation. This I do not agree with …

There could be two kinds of reactions to Basavalingappa's views. One, it can create an explosion in the mind of dalits, and two, it can create a sense of suspicion among the high-caste people. That is, we begin to suspect the thoughts and beliefs that we had accepted without any doubt. These two can take a society forward. What Basavalingappa did was to create such a movement. A similar thing happened when Kuvempu spoke: it made the high castes doubt what they had believed in for ages and created an explosion in the consciousness of dalits. When these two come together, it can lead to big changes. This is necessary for the Kannada literary movement.

Siddalingaiah

In the 1970s, we were all part of a student organization called 'Vichaaravaadi Yuvajana Sabha'. We were inspired by thinkers like Ambedkar, Lohia and Periyar and were involved in spreading agnosticism among the youth. Our organization was also fighting against the problems faced by dalits. It was during this time that we heard Basavalingappa coming out with new kinds of statements. Once he said, 'Gandhi did not know what truth was.' Some time later, he gave a call to 'throw God's photos into gutters'. Next he declared that 'Kannada literature was boosa'.

How and why did he make such statements? What is the context? Only those who were in the meetings in which he gave such statements know the truth. But papers reported his remarks out of context.

His remarks on Gandhi created some confusion among Congress members and embarrassed Gandhians. But it did not give rise to any skirmishes. Again, his statement about throwing God's photos into the gutters did not create any trouble other than creating a little doubt in the minds of some devotees. But his statement 'Kannada literature is boosa' resulted in a huge controversy. It was obvious that there were vested interests behind the anti-Basavalingappa agitation. And because a minister was involved, people were afraid to criticize the agitation. Those who were silent in the first two instances found a new reason to join the anti-Basavalingappa campaign. It is not that those who led the agitation were students of Kannada literature; nor were they staunch supporters of Kannada. Their only demand was that Basavalingappa should resign …

But those of us who were running the rationalist movement extended our complete support to Basavalingappa. My friends and I met him several times during those days. I spoke along with him in several meetings. Angered by this, his opponents attacked me. Once, they even tried to kidnap me but I was saved by my friends …

I learnt from Basavalingappa how to be fearless and develop a fighting spirit. As I was deeply attracted by Marxism, we drifted apart in later years. But he was a source of inspiration for a long time.

He lit the lamp of awareness among the people of our land, particularly in the hearts of the exploited. We should see to it that the lamp is never put out, that is burns forever. That is why we need to remember him always. He is truly Karnataka's Ambedkar.

Our society expects a dalit leader not to develop any individuality or independent thinking. He should always be a sycophant, a follower. That means, a dalit can only have the role of a Hanumantha, never a Rama. Basavalingappa said that he would be a Rama but became a Ravana instead. Perhaps this choice was inevitable for him. He

must have thought it was better to be a Ravana than a Hanumantha. He chose the role with utmost happiness.

The boosa movement created an unprecedented awareness among people. Even though it stirred up a lot of trouble in those days, later it gave good dividends. It brought the dalits and progressive-minded non-dalits together.

P. Lankesh

Whatever Basavalingappa may have said in Mysore, it is obvious that the situation in which he had to say it was created by the upper castes. He would sometimes say things in anger that sounded very absurd. Sometimes he spoke like that just to shock his listeners. It was a time when the shudras had made brahmins very envious by occupying important positions, had started writing good literature and published several thought-provoking books.

This difference between brahmins and non-brahmins was reaching a situation where it was ready to explode. The brahmins' influence was on the decline and there was a rise in shudra power. Even as this new equation was settling down, the dalits started making their way up, creating moments of anxiety for shudras and some optimism for brahmins. Deep down, the brahmins found Basavalingappa's remarks acceptable; but outwardly they showed their discontent. Thus, the brahmins who were waiting to create some trouble joined hands with shudras who were really anxious to wage a war against dalits. Basavalingappa was just a target to vent their anger.

Wedding Lamps on Holeya Street

Translated by S.R. Ramakrishna

Father's name was Kariyappa. Lakshmamma is my mother. As a young boy, my father had been assigned to a gowda household. He remained a bonded labourer till he got married.

The gowda household had two huge bullocks. No one would touch them for fear of being gored. The bullocks wouldn't harm my father who often slept with them in the cattleshed. He would feed them grass and water and wash them clean; he must have appeared like another bullock to them. On the days my father wasn't around, the animals would remain lying in the shed, forsaking their feed and water.

Father was strong. He would work diligently in the fields, gardens and wetlands and return to sleep in the cattleshed. The family had given him a separate aluminium plate and vessel. They handed him tea and coffee in coconut shells.

The gowda's daughter liked Father. She was the one who served him his breakfast and meals. Without letting anyone know, she would sneak in dollops of butter and ghee for him. She would also serve him extra helpings on the days they cooked meat. Their relationship grew stronger over time. On the day of the village fair, the gowdas' house would be packed with guests. Father would fling a tamarind seed up on to their tiled roof. The gowdas' daughter would decipher its meaning and show up at a secret place. Their meetings took place this way for some years.

Preparations were afoot to marry her off to someone in the gowda family. One day, she flung open the door of the room where my father was sleeping. He opened his eyes and looked at the girl, holding a bundle of clothes, her hands full of jewellery, and sobbing. The sight scared him. 'Kariya, get up, let's run away somewhere. We'll get married and live happily.' Father broke out in a sweat and managed not to be persuaded. She had no choice but to marry the boy her parents had chosen for her.

Father often remembered the incident. When I was a small boy, he would tell me the story as though it were a folk tale and feel sad. He would taunt my mother saying he would have been happier had he run away with the gowda's daughter. He would show a scar on his hand and say, 'When I bled here, she couldn't stop crying.' He would then light up a beedi. My father's love story often flashes across my mind, like a movie love story.

Father got tired of his bonded labour after the gowda's daughter was married off. He repaid the loan, gave up his bonded labour and returned to his village. He wanted to get married and started looking around for a bride. The family found him a girl in Neralakere in Gubbi taluk. That was Lakshmamma, my mother.

Freed from bonded labour and married, my father did not want to go and work in some landlord's house, like the others. He looked around for an independent livelihood. That is how he zeroed in on the grease business. In those days, bullock carts were aplenty in our villages. People used them for farming and transport. My father started carrying a tin full of grease on his head. He walked from village to village, calling out, 'Grease, grease … grease for your carts.' He would wake up early, wash his face, light joss sticks before the deity and start work. He would roam the villages in rain and shine, and return at night. He brought home lots of money and bags full of grains and provisions. In time, Father came to be known as Grease Kariyappa.

In our hamlet, everyone earned a living by labouring at the house of an upper-caste family. My father was different. He never went begging for anything at any upper-caste house. He did his job and kept to himself. His business thrived by the day. He brought

home some cows. He got the government to grant him three acres of land. He would till the land on the days he didn't go out selling. It wasn't irrigated; the yield depended on the rains. When my father went out to sell grease, my mother ploughed the land. They grew millet, maize and other grains. My father's hard work became the subject of envy in the hamlet.

Father would go to the arrack shop as soon as it was dark. He would drink five or six bottles and stagger home. He believed that drinking relieved him of the pain of the day's hard labour. Many in the hamlet believed drink was the divine medicine that would let them sleep in peace after a hard day's work. It seems Father used to fetch liquor for his master when he was a labourer. Gowda would give him some. Father's drinking habit, which began then, got out of hand when he started working on his own. He must have thought drinking was a sign of prosperity. In any case, I didn't know of anyone in our hamlet who could beat my father at drinking.

When my father returned from drinking at night, he would bring home a bottle of arrack. He would force my mother to drink. As the days passed, my mother became an expert at drinking. She earned a reputation as the hardest drinker among all the women in the hamlet.

My mother learnt about a relationship my father had with another woman in the hamlet. She had seen them together a couple of times. Father was furious with her and began beating her up. The quarrels between my parents ended in violence. My younger brother and I were the only children my parents had. We had become thin from crying while our parents quarrelled on.

There was no household in our hamlet that could afford three meals a day. With all the drinking, our household too was only getting by in poverty amid the fights. If we cooked some roti and mudde [millet dumpling] in the morning, we would light the stove again only at night. Only two meals. Rice was rare. They brought home half a kilo of rice for some festivals. We yearned for rice. I never got to eat rice every day till I was grown up. Ragi was our food.

Many in our caste feel revulsion towards milk, curd and buttermilk, which they have never tasted. To this day, I feel like throwing up when I see someone eating rice with milk. A friend from my caste has a distaste for curd. I have seen countless people who develop an aversion to foods they have, or had, no access to.

People in the hamlet didn't like my father. If there hadn't been jails, they would have lynched him, such was their cruelty. One day, Father took a long time returning from the arrack shop. We children ate and went to bed. Mother went to sleep waiting for him. Suddenly, we heard a commotion near the arrack shop. My mother ran towards the shop, shrieking. We woke up and ran after her, shivering. People from our hamlet, waiting until Father was sloshed, had got together with people of other castes and picked a fight

with him. They had surrounded him and were thrashing him. Father was drunk and weak. His clothes were in tatters. Some men were holding his limbs tight. Others were stamping on his chest and kicking his stomach and head. My mother ran to his rescue. The men carried him into the village, swinging him from side to side, throwing him down every now and then and kicking him. They flung him on the street at the village entrance. Father lay there unconscious, blood oozing out of his nose and mouth.

Since the assaulters worked in their houses, the masters of the village did not volunteer to get my father justice. Father lay orphaned. My brother, mother and I sat by his side and cried loudly. Father came back to his senses in the middle of the night. He sprang up like a dead man returning to life, and scrambled around.

'They got me drunk and beat me up through deceit. I'll give a police complaint and have all these bastards sent to jail,' he said, gritting his teeth.

Father went to the house of a village elder and knocked at the door. This elder was famous for writing complaints to the police. The elder came out, but sent my father back after scolding him. Humiliated, my father came back home and told me to write a complaint. I wrote as he instructed me. He walked up to the police station early in the morning, in the very state he was in. The police looked at his injuries and what was written in the complaint and sympathized with him. They asked, 'Who wrote this complaint?' and sent word for me. They patted me on the back and said, 'You have a good future. Study well.' They gave me some toffee. Some twenty-five people my father had complained against had to attend court for five or six years. No one testified against the men who had beaten up my father and they were acquitted after many years. The people of the hamlet had to spend all the money they had earned through their labour on the court cases: that was my father's victory.

My father survived the assault through sheer providence. I began to see the terrible envy of the people of our hamlet. That day, I made up my mind that I would achieve something that would bring a good name to my father and make the people of our hamlet bow their heads in shame. My father was more determined than ever to give me a good education and ensure that I got a government job.

Insulted and rendered all alone in the hamlet, my father became weak. He would come back home drunk, sleep in the front yard, and curse the people of the hamlet in vile language. People stopped bothering him. 'Don't trust those who stab you in the back,' he would advise us as he spoke about people he didn't like.

Fights with people outside, fights within the family and losses in business destroyed our family's finances. At night, we had no blankets to cover ourselves with; we had to use my mother's torn saris. The saris wouldn't keep us warm. We would be in tears if we saw someone covered in blankets. With the cold, mosquitoes and bed bugs bothering us, we had to suffer part-sleeplessness for many years.

By the time I got to class seven, I was known as the best student in school. In a house torn by strife, my dreams of studying increased every day. I passed, scoring the highest marks in class seven. Byataraya, the headmaster of our primary school, was fond of me. He wanted me admitted to a hostel. There was a hostel attached to the Kanasavadi Government High School in Doddaballapur taluk. He made me apply there. I got a seat. My father decided to admit me there, motivated by my guru and determined to educate me well. But he had no clue where Kanasavadi was. He knew of no place other than our village and Tiptur. To this day, many people live in our colonies without ever having seen a city or the sea. But my father had a cousin who had left our village, gone to Bangalore and come back. My father took him along and boarded a bus to Kanasavadi. I sat like a prince on the horse of my father's ambition that I should become well educated. No one in the history of the village had gone to a distant hostel to study. Everyone gaped at me as though I was headed abroad. My father got me admitted to the hostel and returned. The place was scary in the beginning, but I gradually came to like it. Many boys and girls elder to me in our hamlet had failed their secondary school exams and were doing menial jobs. They had given up their education, not knowing how to study. Given all this, I couldn't bring myself to hate the brahmin headmaster who had shown me the way to the hostel and secured for me an opportunity to study. I respect him a lot to this day.

I would be overjoyed about going back to our village during the holidays. In the village, people of all castes would look at me as someone special and express appreciation. 'Bring a good name to our place. Study and grow well,' my father's friends from across castes would say, patting me on the back. But I would be dejected by the fearsome fights between my parents. The fights were a nuisance to me, then a high school student. I would be hurt by the taunts of people. I would look forward impatiently to the school reopening.

I entered the last year of high school. My father took a vow that he would sacrifice a lamb if I passed my board exams. He took me to a cloth store in Tumkur and bought me a pair of patched-up trousers for twenty-five rupees. It was too tight for me. That was the first pair of trousers I wore in my life. I was thrilled. My father didn't have the means to buy me a new pair.

I studied hard day and night. I would continue to study even after all the hostel boys had gone to sleep. I sat in the shade of plants and trees and studied all by myself. I wrote my exams well. My high school education came to an end. I began to see hundreds of dreams as I awaited my results. 'I'll fulfil my vow once you pass. I'll admit you to a good college. You can study as much as you want as long as I am around,' my father would say. My younger brother wasn't studious; he was considered wayward. It seems he had pulled out a knife and threatened his teacher when he was still in class

seven. With no one to keep an eye on him, he would steal tender coconuts from other people's gardens and use the money to watch movies. He wouldn't go to school regularly and was known as a 'political' type. He failed his class seven exams. My father often said he would teach my dropout brother the grease trade.

While I waited for my results, I started going out to work with the grown-ups, hoping to earn some money for my college expenses. I would get ten or fifteen rupees a day. I would counsel my parents when they started fighting. My words carried weight because I was considered educated. One night, my father came home dead drunk. He beat up my mother with a pestle. He threatened me when I went to stop him. Blood oozed from my mother's skull. Screaming, as was her practice, she went away to her brother's house.

My father looked at us, crying, and said, 'Don't cry. Don't be scared as long as I am around.' He wiped his tears without showing it. When it was day, he didn't go looking for my mother, as he usually would. He went away to sell grease.

My brother, Venkatesha, went roaming with his friends. I was famished and tired. I latched myself in and lay down. I began worrying about my parents. It was afternoon. Father returned in the scorching sun and knocked on the door. I woke up suddenly and opened the door.

He saw that I had been lying in bed, covered in my mother's sari, and said, 'Why are you asleep at this hour? Are you trying to hang yourself?'

I was ashamed and scared at the same time, and said angrily, 'No, I was just lying down.'

Father had brought home some ragi in a bag. He gave me a rupee, and said, 'Go to the mill and get this ground.'

I walked towards the mill inside town, carrying the ragi, which hadn't been cleaned.

The mill was full of people that day. By the time I got the flour done, it was dark. I walked briskly towards our hamlet. The doors of our house were closed. I felt bad that my father was already drunk, and had gone to sleep. I kept calling for a long time, but he didn't unlatch the door. When I shook the door hard, I realized the latch was giving way. I continued shaking it. It fell open. The lights were off. I kept calling for my father and looked on the floor. The mat was empty. I found a matchbox. I lit a stick. My father had hung himself from a beam.

'Ayyayyappa …' I screamed and ran out. I sped along the street, shouting, 'Father has hung himself. Please, someone, come.'

No one came towards our house. Some were terrified. Others thought my father wasn't the cowardly sort to commit suicide and that he was probably drunk and play-acting. His enemies in the hamlet wouldn't budge, no matter how hard I tried to

persuade them. Crying, I ran inside the village. My brother, watching TV somewhere, came running. I told him what had happened. He joined me and started crying.

A man from the lingayat headman's household, who heard the news, rushed towards our house. My cousin came with him. More people, from other castes, joined them.

The hamlet was awake all night. Everyone who came to speak to us sympathized with us and told us to be brave. The villagers decided there should be no police complaint. Day broke. They had lied to my mother that my father was not well and brought her to the village. Relatives from both my parents' sides poured in. By noon, our relatives got together and untied the noose.

My father had become stiff, like a dry frog. Ants surrounded his torn tongue and closed eyelids. There were bloodstains on the floor. People quickly wrapped the body in a mat and carried it away. Our relatives prepared a pyre in the field. They made me light the flames since I was the eldest son. To this day, I feel the funeral flames burning in my inner being.

My father, who had vowed to educate me, had turned to ashes. As the rice and ragi were being cleaned for his memorial rituals, my board exam results were announced. I had passed with high marks and with a first class. I became known as the only untouchable in the history of the village who had passed the board exams, in the first attempt and with a first class. They were preparing to sacrifice a buffalo in memory of my father, who had vowed he would sacrifice a lamb if I passed my board exams. People of the hamlet forgot their hostility and took part in the rituals.

After the rituals were done, people started discussing where my brother and I should be sent. My mother did not have the means to send me to college. But for an old cycle and some grease tins, my father had left no other property. Our relatives had no means to take us, now orphaned, in either. People then looked to my cousin Ramanna.

Ramanna had been a bonded labourer in a lingayat household in our village. With the help of some acquaintances, he freed himself and migrated to Bangalore. While he was still in the village, he would decorate the walls of people's houses for auspicious occasions. Using a blue dye, he drew peacocks, flowers and rangoli patterns on their walls. Even people from nearby villages invited him to draw pictures on their walls. He was a self-taught artist.

Ramanna liked my father a lot. He had settled in Bangalore after marriage and was surviving doing odd jobs. He looked wealthy to everyone when he visited the village. He decided to take us in. My mother and our relatives begged him, 'Show these boys the way ahead, please.' He gathered courage and boarded a bus to Bangalore with my brother and me. My mother was left all alone.

It was the first time that we had set foot in Bangalore. It was a new experience for us —buildings that touched the skies and vehicles that flowed like water. Ramanna took us to his little house, with a tiled roof, at Bilekahalli on Bannerghatta Road. It was difficult for him, his wife and the two of us brothers to live together in a small room.

Someone said that I could get a job quickly if I did a diploma course. I decided I would study for a diploma. Ramanna borrowed money from people he knew and made me apply to the Jayachamarajendra Polytechnic. I got a seat in the mechanical engineering department.

The earnings from Ramanna's labour weren't enough for us to eat well. We would be hungry but the pots would be empty. My brother and I used to wet our beds. The little room used to stink every morning because of this habit. Our sister-in-law quickly became hostile towards us. She began to talk angrily, as though she wanted us gone as quickly as possible.

My brother, Venkatesha, joined the house of a rich man in the neighbouring Belagarahalli as a bonded labourer. He borrowed a thousand rupees from his master and gave it to me. With his help, I joined a private college in Tiptur. I took up science for my first pre-university course.

The girl from the farm next to ours was studying in class ten. She knew about the ups and downs in my life. During the holidays, she would come near the fields and speak to me like a friend. I would feel happy just speaking to her. Now that I was a college student, I wanted to tell her what I felt about her.

Granite traders sought a thoroughfare through our lands. They offered 3,000 rupees if we let them use it for two years. My mother agreed. My brother, who knew she might blow up the money, was adamant that he would no longer do bonded labour. My mother repaid the money due to his master and got him released. Freed, my brother went to work with the others. I entered the second year of my pre-university course. Some of my friends gave up science and took up arts. I chose Kannada as a major subject in my second year of pre-university. From then, arts became my preferred discipline of study.

My study routine was much the same as it had been at Kanasavadi. Heartbreak had sharpened my pride in studying. I got up at four in the morning and sat reading under a street lamp. After studying, I would run half a dozen laps around the village and take a cold-water bath. The other children in the hamlet began to emulate my habit of waking up before the birds and starting to study. I didn't have enough money to buy new clothes for college. My brother used to give me fifty or a hundred rupees every now and then. I would use the money to buy shirts and trousers spread out for sale on the streets. They would be loose or tight. Once, I noticed old clothes on display on the street near Pai Hotel in Tiptur. A special-looking black pair caught my attention. I asked the price.

They quoted fifty rupees and sold it to me for forty. I wore it and went to college the next day.

Everyone in college looked at my trousers and started giggling. I couldn't understand why. There were buttons at the bottom of the trousers. I had fastened those buttons near my feet, and was roaming around. A friend told me the truth, 'This isn't for men. It's something Muslim women wear.'

I can't remember getting new clothes stitched till I started earning money independently. My body was covered and protected by old clothes. I wore just one pair of trousers all through the three years of my degree course. The trousers had a tear near the zip. It was a black pair. I had stitched up the tear with white thread and smeared some soot on it to cover it. I walked around holding a book to hide the tear.

I passed the pre-university course with a first class. By then, my brother had learnt how to husk coconuts and carry the copra to the lorry, and how to drive a tractor. Though young, he was as strong as older men, capable of working hard and earning wages. He admitted me to a degree course. He was the one who looked after my mother and me.

As a BA student, I would wait for my bus at the village bus stand. Many boys and girls from our village came there to travel to the college. I wouldn't speak to anyone. I would stand at a distance, reading a book. I had started writing poetry by then. Even as a class seven student, I would make up stories like in the puranas, and narrate them for hours. My poems got published in the college annual magazine. People started recognizing me as a poet. In the eyes of the people at my village bus stand, I had become a great poet.

Shailaja, a lingayat girl who lived inside the village, studied in my college. She was a sociology student. She had read my poems in the college annual magazine and told her friends about me. Her dignity attracted me. Her family owned orchards, fields and wetlands. Her house was the biggest in the village. Without my knowledge, this girl turned into a lamp of love in the depths of my heart. I wouldn't look at any girl in school and college. I wouldn't speak to girls either. I suffered from the feeling of inferiority that I was untouchable and poor. The wounds inflicted by the girl in our neighbouring farm had not yet healed. Yet, my longing for this girl who came to study for her degree course didn't diminish. Shailaja would come to the bus stand every day and I would land up there soon after. I would wait at the bus stand, a serious expression on my face. A year went by this way. I stepped into the second year of my BA course.

One day, as she stood at the bus stand, I took advantage of the fact that the place was deserted except for us. I took a deep breath and spoke to her. 'Who comes to teach you Kannada?' I asked, sweating, and my mouth going dry. She replied indifferently. Without another word, I went to college.

That whole day, I felt I had achieved something great. It was a big thing that I had spoken to a lingayat girl. In the days that followed, I spoke to her about textbooks on the occasions I found the bus stand deserted. She once told me she had read my poems and that she wrote poetry too. That bit of news delighted me. I said I wanted to read her poems and borrowed them. I gave her my poems. This exchange of poems continued for a year. Our friendship became deeper. She knew about my inferiority complex and expressed sympathy for me. 'Read and write well,' she encouraged me. I became aware that she felt an inexpressible feeling for me. Her poems were filled with pain and helplessness. Anger against patriarchy was evident in her writing. Yet, she was proud of me, she loved me. One day, I wrote a poem for her. It went thus:

Tear away the eye's veil:
I've brought down the moon
to tuck into your unadorned hair.
Tear away the eye's veil:
I've brought down the clouds
to squeeze into your scorched eyes.

Fling open the doors and windows,
and show me your flayed face.
I'll grasp your hand and run.

Wedding lamps await you
on Holeya Street,
their eyes wide open.

Don't stand still.
Don't spill your tears
lest they rot your delicate feet.
Come cascading down, friend,
like the water of the rain,
from the summit out there
to this depth of depths.

Many stories were making the rounds in and around our village those days. We heard that the upper castes had burnt alive untouchables who had provoked them and that they had tied up and pushed to death upper-caste girls and untouchable boys who had fallen in love and got married and that they could be extremely cruel if their conventions were violated. I had heard some upper-caste people threaten untouchables, 'You may eat meat, but we eat humans.'

Literature and rational thinking gave me the ability to face these fears. The lingayat girl was a progressive thinker too. Just as I suffered the violence of my untouchability, she suffered the violence of her caste. The desire to transcend our castes and start a new life became stronger in us. Poetry had given us such strength. But neither of us was able to express our innermost feelings.

I passed my degree exams. I applied for and joined the master's course in Kannada at the Tumkur centre of Bangalore University. She remained at home. I joined a hostel in Tumkur and began studying. I would visit our village every now and then. I would speak to her. She got a seat in a teacher's training course. But she dreamt of doing a master's course. When I was studying in my second year, she came to Tumkur as a first year MA student. She joined a hostel for girls from her community and began studying.

Once, when we were discussing something, she said, 'Can you marry me?' I was delighted. I agreed boldly. We became soulmates from that day. The revolutionary thoughts in the lectures of Ki Ram Nagaraj, Baraguru Ramachandrappa, Rajappa Dalavai and S.G. Siddaramaiah strengthened our love.

I topped my MA class. The Kannada University in Hampi had called for applications for its Ph.D programme. She gave me the money and sent me to Hampi to study. My younger brother got married before I did. He fell in with the wrong sort of people and started drinking.

The Kannada University hadn't developed all that much. It had no hostel facilities for Ph.D scholars. For that reason and also because of the incessant thoughts of my friend, I gave up my Ph.D and returned to our village. I joined the daily *Prajapragati* in Tumkur as a reporter. She was in the final stages of her MA course. We had friends from many communities, including brahmins, vokkaligas, lingayats and madivalas who had been supporting our love since our degree days. They would come home, eat beef and sleep over. The entire hamlet was astonished to see upper-caste friends visit our house. People there transcended their caste feelings and treated my friends with great respect and love. My friends became known in the hamlet as though they were our relatives. A madivala friend called Alur Doddaningappa used to come frequently to our hamlet to see me. We used to be together all the time, like brothers. He would come to Tumkur, ask about our love and encourage us to get married.

We decided to marry the very day after Shailaja had completed her MA. Doddaningappa promised to make arrangements for the wedding in Mysore. Shailaja and I decided we should organize a high-quality cultural event before we left the village. The village didn't know about our love.

On Basava's birth anniversary in 1998, we organized a meeting with the theme 'Basavanna: A Study'. People in the village supported us by contributing money. Vachana placards adorned the streets. That night, about 100 poets, thinkers and singers came to our village and stayed in Shailaja's house and mine. People of the village took care of the hospitality of the guests. The entire village gathered near the wedding hall. Intellectuals made long speeches about Basavanna. That was followed by a poetry session. Friends sang vachanas to the accompaniment of the harmonium and the tabla. For the people of the village, it became an unforgettable event.

On Basava Jayanti day, news about Shailaja and me became the talking point in the village. A lingayat classmate, who had taken part in the event, had made our secret public. News spread that Shailaja and I had already got married. My mother and brother were petrified. I fled the village.

I was holed up in a friend's room in Tumkur. I got to know from someone close to me that Shailaja had been locked up at home and that she had rebelled against her family and refused to give them any clue about my whereabouts. I was afraid to walk about in public. Doddaningappa came over from Mysore at this point. No one had troubled my family or the people of my hamlet.

One evening, I handed a razor blade to Doddaningappa. He was flabbergasted. I requested him to shave my head. I wanted to look so disfigured that no one would recognize me. He regretfully shaved off all the hair on my head. He then got me to shave off his hair. I was haunted by the feeling, day and night, that someone had come over and kicked me. Several days went by this way.

My first poetry collection *Himada Hejje* had been published by the prestigious Christ College Kannada Sangha. I became known to some people as a poet. I sent a poem to the weekly *Lankesh Patrike* under the name of the poet H. Govindaiah. It got published, leaving Govindaiah astonished. Doddaningappa took me over to Govindaiah's house and introduced me to him. I told him I was the one who had sent a poem to *Lankesh Patrike* under his name. He guffawed. You must be a good poet then, he joked. He then got to know about our love and promised to get us married if we went to him. I returned to Tumkur reassured.

It was the last day of the MA exams. I was strangely troubled. I didn't have a single paisa. It was dark. With mad courage, I went to the appointed place. My friend Shivappa came over to me. He had some money. Shailaja came after a while. The three of us boarded a bus to Mysore. We reached Mysore at midnight. We sat in the bus stand,

yawning and waking up in a panic at every little sound. I called Govindaiah at dawn. He told us to go to the house of Swami Anand, a reporter with *Lankesh Patrike*. We reached that house at six.

Swami Anand took me to the house of the rationalist K. Ramdas, to whom we explained our situation. When he heard about our unemployment, Anand said, 'In your enthusiasm, don't forget the reality. You have no jobs. How will you live? You have no help from your families. Get back to your homes till you find some employment.' We told him we would get by somehow and pleaded with him to get us married. He agreed. After a couple of days, Manava Mantapa, a reformist organization headed by Ramdas, made arrangements for our wedding. We were married in the simple way suggested by Kuvempu in *Mantra Mangalya*[1]. The who's who of the DSS attended the wedding.

Swami Anand got the editor of a local paper to gift us a stove, plates and tumblers. He persuaded a friend, working at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, to find us a room on rent. Carrying a sack of pots and pans on our back, we set out for Bangalore. The sack had only a few articles, but it seemed heavy.

When a couple marries out of caste, they become social outcasts. Supporting them in these circumstances, treating them with love and giving them a place to stay is extraordinary service. It is the duty of those who talk of human values and social transformation to protect such couples and ensure that they are not disillusioned. People like Swami Anand consistently carry out this responsibility without caring for publicity.

With a sack full of small pots and pans, we stepped into Bangalore. We had no place to use them and begin our life together. Swami Anand's friend, Delhi Venkatesh, worked as a superintendent at the IIM in Bangalore. We met him. He hails from a tribal community. He's a kind man, sensitive to the troubles of others. He found us a room near Arakere Gate on Bannerghatta Road. He paid the security deposit of Rs 4,000. The rent was Rs 300 a month. That room, with no air or light, became a school that taught us the lessons of life.

My cousin, Ramanna, had been appointed as a plumber in the same institute. He was not in a position to help us monetarily, but he visited us every now and then and instilled courage in us. On some days, with nothing to eat, Shailaja and I would land up at his house at lunchtime. The family would have no choice but to offer us food.

Delhi Venkatesh helped us by paying our rent for seven or eight months and buying us all our groceries. If he had abandoned us in Bangalore, perhaps we wouldn't have been alive. We always remember his humane ways. After a few months, we felt we were troubling Venkatesh. I decided to look for a job. I went to some factories and asked for a job, but nothing worked out. I attended an interview for the job of a security guard. They sent me home after asking me why, with an MA, I should be doing a job that paid so little.

I was in no position to admit Shailaja, who was pregnant, to a hospital, nor was I able to buy her medicines and nutritious food. We went to bed hungry on many days, just experiencing the joy of touching the baby in her womb. Some of my friends worked as journalists in Bangalore. I would borrow a hundred or two and light our stove once in a while.

Every Sunday, blood flows in the drains of Bangalore. The aroma of meat wafts from every house. One Sunday, I developed a craving for meat. I had just ten rupees. I walked towards a meat shop. The shopkeeper welcomed me with a lot of respect. How much for a kilo, I asked. He said it was a hundred rupees, and enthusiastically asked if I wanted a kilo or two. I asked for just a hundred grams. No bones, give me meat from the leg, I said.

He was livid. 'You're buying a hundred grams, and you want meat from the leg?'

I thought he was joking, and said, 'Brother, it's not for us but for our dog. Give us good meat.'

The shopkeeper ran me down even more. Other customers started smiling. I felt humiliated and walked away, saying, 'Never mind, I don't want your meat.'

Shailaja was in labour pain. I took her to Vani Vilas Hospital with help from an elderly Malayali Christian woman who was our neighbour. Venkatesh and some other friends gave me some money. Shailaja gave birth to a girl at midnight, in a hospital where corruption ruled. It was so bad that everyone, from the guard at the door to the doctor, had to be bribed. The mother and child remained in hospital for a week. The Christian grandmother remained in the hospital, taking care of them. I remain grateful to her for her patience and love.

My village got to hear about the delivery. My brother came over. He brought along my father's elder brother. They went back to the village after a couple of months. Shailaja, the baby and I started living together. We were admirers of the Buddha and so started calling our daughter Sanghamitre. That became her name.

The family had become bigger, but my unemployment problem remained. Shailaja began to think of her family and would often start crying. I was gripped by fear. Shailaja was burning up with strong feelings, nurtured since childhood, for her village, her house and her relatives. A strange feeling of being outsiders in Bangalore began to overcome us. We gradually got familiar with some families in the neighbourhood. We met a variety of neighbours: men who had married widows, couples who had married outside their religions, women who had left their husbands and hitched themselves to other men, and people who had no help. I felt Bangalore offered the kind of social independence that couldn't be imagined in a village. Shailaja gradually became more realistic about her family, which had abandoned her because she had married an untouchable. It dawned on

her that she shouldn't feel bad about people who loved their caste more. She slowly stopped thinking of her family and grieving over the separation.

My story 'Kulavadi' got published in the weekly magazine *Sudha*. A boy called Raju, hailing from my district, became my friend because of the story. He used to work at a printing press. I told him about my difficulties. He then took me to Nagathihalli Ramesh, editor of the magazine *Spardha Prapancha*. I explained my background to him. He became emotional. He took me to a big restaurant and bought me a sumptuous meal, the kind of which I had never tasted in my life. In every morsel, I saw a picture of Shailaja and our child, and found it difficult to eat.

Ramesh pulled out a thousand rupees and handed it to me. 'Don't worry. I'll give you a thousand rupees every month till you get a decent job,' he promised.

He kept his word. I was filled with wonder at his character and his helping nature. He too had married out of his caste. We started living comfortably with the thousand rupees Ramesh had given us. We had been living on frugal meals and here was an opportunity to eat well. He was planning to make a film called *Nakkeera Joke* (Careful, You Might Laugh). He got me to write eight songs for the film and produced an album. I felt I had become famous. Our pictures got published in the newspapers and people started respecting me as a film lyricist. The songs won much praise. Many people planted the dream in my mind that my situation would change completely once the film was released. But the production was stalled for some reason. The dream wouldn't go away; it remained deep in my heart.

I had no choice but to wake up early in the morning, fill a flask with tea, and go around the streets hawking it. Some days, the tea wouldn't find buyers. I would bring the flask back home and pour out all the tea in the bathroom. Baraguru Ramachandrappa, a teacher I admire, got me a part-time lecturer's job at NMKRV Degree College for Women. With his help, I gave up selling tea and became a lecturer. Dr Nataraj Huliyar, who was the moving spirit behind the publication of my poetry collection, became close to us. His discipline, integrity and compassion influenced me. As the days passed, he became a part of our family, a guru and friend.

I got an opportunity to study for a Ph.D at Bangalore University. The job at NMKRV College was gone. Around this time, I became acquainted with Lakshmipati Kolara, a poet whose work haunts me deeply. His poetry and his personality influenced me. He spoke to Dr K.Y. Narayana Swamy, an important poet, critic and folklorist in Kannada and got me a job as a lecturer in a private college in Chintamani.

The Karnataka government decided to fill its reservation backlog. It called for applications everywhere. I applied to several departments, but couldn't get a job. One day, the Kalpataru Pre-University College in our native Tiptur called for applications to fill its backlog. I was electrified. I applied immediately. Nagathihalli Ramesh's

immense concern, the help of minister K.H. Ranganath, K. Shadakshari, K. Rajashekhar, B.R. Vishwanath, K. Dorairaju and P.K. Thipperudrappa, and the support of several people who were fond of me got me the job. I remain ever grateful for the humanity of everyone who ensured that no injustice was done to me: I had scored the highest marks in my Kannada MA exams, been active in literature and married out of my caste. I got a job under the reservation policy. But for it, I'd be lost in the slavery imposed by modern power centres. We left the metropolis of Bangalore and travelled to Tiptur. I was proud to have been chosen as a lecturer at the Kalpataru institute, where Shailaja and I had studied. News that I had got the job had spread all over town. My mother and brother celebrated my achievement. Many people praised me as though I was a great achiever. I struggled to find a house on rent in Tiptur. Lingayats are in a majority; they would sniff out my caste and say they wouldn't rent out their house to non-vegetarians. After much searching, I got a house owned by someone from the madivala community. He knew my background but didn't discriminate on caste lines and gave me the house.

The upper castes in Tiptur remain faithful to their traditions, conventions and restrictions. They believe they follow these restrictions for their own progress. Many dogmatic rich people believe they will be destroyed if they rent their house to untouchables. I couldn't escape the menace of untouchability despite my status as a lecturer.

Conservative veerashaiva families live in our neighbourhood. They don't let my daughter into their house. Although Shailaja is a veerashaiva, these people treat her as an untouchable. We don't expect casteist people to love us. We ignore them and live happily. Many secular people live in Tiptur. We are doing fine in the company of these people. We go to our house in our hamlet boldly and eat there. But we still can't roam the streets of the town without fear. It has been seven years since our wedding. No one has assaulted us. I am indebted to my town for letting us live freely.

My mother lives in the village, doing menial jobs. However much I help her, she just can't sit at home. She uses the money she earns to drink, and lies near the arrack shop, or on some street. She is caught in the shadows of the past, and wears flowers, kumkuma and bangles even though her husband is no more. She faced the criticism that society meted out to her and lived life the way she wanted.

My brother had got into bad company and would drink and fight. With help from a friend, I got him a job at a factory in Tumkur. He has settled in that city with his family, and has begun a new life. For a year after I joined the Tiptur job, I didn't get my pay. Many people would vanish the moment they saw me. I noticed that some writers, who pretended to be progressive, had made moneymaking their sole objective in life, and were blind to human values. Many were busy hiding their greed in the garb of social concern.

Sanghamitre is a class two student in a Christian school in Tiptur. No one from Shailaja's house has come to see her. Many who marry out of their caste are reunited with their families a couple of years after their wedding. But Shailaja hasn't got such an opportunity yet. I believe that is because she married an untouchable like me, and from the same place. Some conservative people tell her, 'Your family would have accepted it if you had married into any caste but the madigas.' She always stands up to such advice. She loves the life she has embraced.

I don't understand the language of caste today. To use a metaphor: in my father's time, the upper castes would stand before him and whisper in a language he understood —'We must lynch this Kariya when he goes to work in the morning.' My father would understand the meaning of their words, take another route in the morning, and save his own life. As his son, I stand among the same upper castes. I can hear many things being said around me. But I don't understand the language. When I get up in the morning and start walking, many daggers pierce my back. If I could understand the language of caste as my father used to, I could save my life. I walk along the path of this age-old river, waiting for a time when I will become the river.

In this river of life, remains of times past float like boats. The gleam in the eyes of many generations, which seem to have taken root in the water, tells thousands of stories.

As I gaze on the river, the past endures as do the older generations and I am blinded by the light of a monstrous ship. I am gripped by the anxiety that the light in my eyes is being extinguished and the light of the ship is becoming my eyes. Who is inside the ship? Could there be people inside who might love this man, wounded at being called an outcast? Could it be carrying people who can't bear my existence, coming to hunt me down? Or is the ship taking some other course?

I can't tell from here.

Lakkur Ananda

‘My village, its atmosphere and culture are the primary inspirations for my writing; the connections with wider public issues and ideas are made from that base,’ says this young Kannada dalit poet, Lakkur Ananda. Born in 1980, Ananda did his early schooling in Lakkur, Kolar district. He then became the first person from his village to go to college. The desire for higher education took him to Mallur and then Kolar (MA), Bangalore (BEd) and finally Hyderabad, where he studied mass communication. His family is Telugu-speaking, so he is an accomplished trilingual, who also reads widely in Kannada, Telugu and English.

Ananda traces his early leanings towards poetry to a village bhajana troupe that would walk through the streets every morning singing Anubhava lyrics. These lyrics, many of which can be traced back to the hugely influential twelfth-century poet-philosopher Basava, celebrate everyday life and human relationships. ‘I realized that there was much about our life and our experiences that I could put into poetry. I decided when I was quite young—maybe eighteen or nineteen—to be a poet.’

Also nudging him towards a literary life were his grandmother’s stories, from which he learnt many things that have stood him in good stead. He shared one of her stories with us: ‘There was a reddy family in a village. The man had two wives. The second wife was very beautiful. In the same village, there lived a poor madiga family. The mother worked in the fields; the son helped her. They used to sing as they worked. One day, the wives scolded them. A few days later, one of the reddys’ cows died. The madigas were asked to move the carcass, which they did. They skinned the animal and distributed the meat. From the skin, the boy made a pair of the most beautiful sandals that had ever been seen, each adorned with a swan. The whole village thronged to see the sandals. The reddy heard about them and desired them. “Give me these sandals and I will give you … [he made several tempting offers].” The boy refused every one of those. Finally the reddy asked: “What is it that you will take from me for these sandals?” “Your second wife.” The reddy agreed. I learnt from this story that one must excel; but that is not enough. One must persist.’

The Kolar area has a gory history of attacks on dalits by the dominant lingayat groups, which can be traced back to the 1970s. A number of significant Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS) initiatives and campaigns were triggered by incidents of murder, rape, or the burning down of hutments that took place in the region. A definitive experience for

Lakkur Ananda was the massacre in Kambalapalli, a village near his own, in 2000, when seven dalits were burnt alive. Despite concerted protests from dalits—who asked for the resignation of Chief Minister S.M. Krishna (a lingayat himself), citing the precedent of the CM being asked to step down after the Staines murders in Odisha—the perpetrators were not punished. 'This and other atrocities—Karamchedu, Chunduru—haunted me. This was the context of my generation and we had to find a way of responding to it.' Much of his poetry is about such violence, of atrocities, lost lands and lost bonds, and has appeared in both mainstream and little magazines and newspapers in Karnataka.

A first collection, *Oorinda Oorige* (From One Village to Another), appeared in 2004. 'This book was put together by a friend in Hubli who liked my poetry, collected what was published and brought out the book. He just invited me to the release.' A second collection, *Epathara Kallena Mele* (On the Twentieth Milestone), came out in 2006; a third, *Batavadeyagaha Rasithi* (Undelivered Letter), in 2008; and the fourth, *Ithi Ninna Videyanu* (Yours Subordinately) in 2010. 'The first three books were very well received, but the fourth has not met the same critical enthusiasm,' he observes. 'Senior Kannada poets encouraged me. So did my lecturers at Mallur who lent me books and made suggestions,' he says. His poetry has been translated into Telugu and Malayalam, and he has received several awards, including the Dalit Sahitya Award and the Sri Sri Award, both in 2009.

There Is No Hand There to Wipe Your Tears[1]

Translated by Vanamala Viswanatha

Don't feel too complacent:
you may have escaped the hangman's noose;
you will not escape
this life sentence
until your dying day.

The wailing, the agonized cries
and the pain-filled words
of those you killed

may remind you of your life sentence;
when you light a lamp
it may look like fire and haunt you.

You do not know—
in the hutments you set on fire
there also hung the portraits of
Buddha, Basava, Gandhi, Ambedkar,
Christ, Allah, Ram and Rahim.
While the lamp in your house
turned into fire and burnt all those
who'd placed themselves on the wall—
Gandhi on non-violence,
Ambedkar on equality,
Buddha on peace,
Basava, Marx, Lenin, Jesus …
not one of them spoke a word, for sure.

For, the fire in your lamp
had made them all mute.
Gandhi's three monkeys
had bolted from the room
and sat in the middle of the road
outside the town
closing their eyes, ears and mouths.
While the pages from the book
in Ambedkar's hand
screamed piteously
for freedom.
Even in the midst of that inferno
the syllables of Marx, Lenin and Periyar
were cooling themselves

in the shadow of the fire.

While Viveka and Paramahamsa with their beatific smiles
smiled on, Buddha was getting ready
to hold a seminar for Ananda
on violence and non-violence.
Unable to come out of their sacred temples,
Rama, Krishna, Christ and Allah
chanted lucidly in response:
'May the dead attain deliverance.
May the killers have mercy.'

The cackling laughter of those,
who, far from the conflagration,
held the lamp
had become one with
the wailing, shrieking and shouting
of those inside the fire.

Even while all this was happening,
the white pigeons
perched on the electric wires
were pacing to and fro
in a freedom march
singing 'Vande Mataram'.

With Just One Needle …

Translated by Vanamala Viswanatha

Give me a needle,

just one,
my love …

Torn and tattered dreams
I'll arrange and stitch together with love;
severed wings
I'll tie them back onto the birds
and set them free in the skies;
all the broken words
I'll gather them
and put them back into the heart.
All this
with just one needle …

I'll give life to all your fantasies,
I will pry open your stuck-together eyelashes,
I will part your sealed-together lips,
And coax them into a smiling blossom
All this
with just one needle …

All over the expectant land
I'll dig small pits to sow seeds, then
prick the sulky clouds
to call down the rain.
I'll demolish the wall between us
building a bridge of love
turning myself into the green
that lies all over the arid plain.
All this
with just one needle!

Takamurya[2]

Translated by Vanamala Viswanatha

Here, for every thing
they look for evidence,
lowering sharp knives
into the depths of open eyes
for dried-up tears.

Upon confiscated material
the police build bungalows.
Half-written lines
they release as complete poems.

Just loosen our hands a little:
we will look for
our own confiscated dreams.

Robbing us of our food,
they have marble pillars carved
to deck the graves of the dead.
Standing on bundles of notes,
judges put justice up for sale
on a balancing scale
covering the Goddess of Justice
in a burqa.

Will you give me
at least now
some beer or wine?
No, not water;
for, only you know

it is not pure;
let others not learn of it.

Let me drown myself
in the heady wine you give;
let me talk to things at ease
wrapping myself in solitude.

The same chisel that shaped the marble,
the moving swing that now stands still,
the bowl and basket of fruits and vegetables
now standing empty,
the implements
robbed of the shape given by the carpenter,
and she
who said she knew no hell called love
and grew distant for no reason …

Bayalu Collective

The popular Bayalu Collective was born out of a set of questions that a few young dalit college lecturers asked themselves. They asked: how are we, as *dalit* teachers, different from teachers in general? In what way will our classes be different? What is the contribution we should try and make to our students and to society? How can we question the existing forms of education and fashion a new model with compassion and social awareness at its centre?

'Bayalu' means open ground, or field, and the Bayalu Collective is an open forum for debate. It was started in 2008 in Ramanagara. The young lecturers who came together to form it had been selected by the Karnataka Public Service Commission (KPSC) and were new to their jobs. During their student days, these young lecturers in Kannada had taken part in various social movements—student, farmer, dalit—as well as in DSS-led and inspired activities.

Their questions were all the more important as the majority of students studying Kannada were dalit and, to a lesser extent, backward castes. The group started a little magazine, *Bayalu*, which received such enthusiastic response that they felt they should extend their activities beyond Ramanagara and open the membership to anyone concerned with the question of education.

The organization has grown and now the Bayalu Collective draws together socially committed youth from different backgrounds. Today, its membership includes ten castes, though it continues to be predominantly dalit—and predominantly comprising teachers. 'We are inspired by Babasaheb and believe in equality. We work for different issues and there is place in the organization for everybody … Though thousands of teachers in the state may have been working with similar aspirations as individuals earlier, Bayalu is the first united effort of this kind and magnitude,' writes Hulikunte Murthy, an active member of the team.

About fifteen to twenty of them from in and around Bangalore meet every second Saturday of the month at the Government Science College. They have been doing this regularly for a year now—meeting to discuss the syllabi and teaching strategies and share ideas about how to teach in order to equip students with the critical tools and information that would enable them to engage with current social conditions and issues. 'We always study the prescribed textbooks for all the subjects very closely and discuss it in detail before deciding on how to present it to our students. We then work

accordingly in the classroom and try to engage our students in a way that they follow easily without feeling the need to refer to [substandard] guides and digests,' Murthy reports.

The Kannada syllabus, they say, has been designed by progressive academics and is a good one. However, 'quite often, teachers who are unaware or unconcerned about such causes select texts and read them in ways antagonistic to the dalit cause of egalitarianism—for instance, the Mahabharata or its sub-stories or Sarvagnya's vachanas are taught as moral models. Bayalu strives to use the prevalent texts of different ages as tools to understand historical notions of inequality and to undo it through their reading—be it in ancient Kannada literature, contemporary work, the Ramayana or the Mahabharata.'

The team is also committed to sharing these questions with the general public and *educating* them about education. They do this not only through discussion and writing but also through songs performed at political and academic gatherings. We learn from the interview below that key intellectuals from academics, politics and public life have held discussions with the group in these regular monthly meetings and the larger gatherings that Bayalu organizes periodically.

The team also works closely with a variety of social movements. 'We have participated in such protests as the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the struggle against the Kudremukh project, the farmers' battle against multinational companies and imperialism, movements for the rights of women, sexual minorities, etc., and are proud of our association with these causes.' However, the collective is not so happy with the fact there is little involvement from non-dalits in dalit issues: 'Despite there being a long history of struggle for dalit rights in Karnataka, acts of discrimination, atrocities and inhuman behaviour are still prevalent here. Who should address these concerns? There are ongoing campaigns for the environment, gender equality, against corruption, for linguistic status, for the rights of workers … don't they feel the need to fight for this cause? Why don't people belonging to upper castes, who claim to be concerned about all sorts of causes, regard untouchability as a worthy cause to fight against? If the dalit movement has failed to resolve such issues, what are the reasons for it? Bayalu tries to analyse these questions.'

Currently, they are working in teams of four and five to research 'from below' aspects of the contemporary situation (social discrimination, corruption, the women's question are some themes), and write essays that will be collected into a book to be used by their students as well as the general public. Four books by Bayalu members have been published by Hampi University in their Mantapamale series.[1] The discussion that follows is between Narayanaswami K. (Narayan) and three active members of the collective: Ravi Kumar Bagi, Prakash Manteda and Hulikunte Murthy. Readers will

notice that different members of the group speak in response to a question, but we have not identified individuals, since it was their wish that this should be an interview of the team as a unit.

An Interview with the Bayalu Collective

Translated by Maithreyi K.R.

Narayan: When was Bayalu started? What led to its formation and what were its main inspirations?

Bayalu: A small group of us, mostly dalit teachers of Kannada, once had a discussion on the meaning and implications of our teaching practices. We were reflecting upon questions like: ought our lectures be limited to the syllabus and the classroom? Should we merely explain the texts in a 'dead' manner, or should we take a further step and elaborate on them in the context of present-day realities? We quickly came to the conclusion that the work of a lecturer ought not to be limited to the classroom and that we must explore the possibilities of recreating our roles as teachers in novel forms through other activities. We also discussed the fundamental need to discuss the question of the relevance of our textbooks with ordinary people outside the university. We felt we should teach by relating the text to actual experiences in society. Since we were also influenced by other progressive organizations, we felt we should form an organization of our own to engage with these issues. We agreed to meet once every month. We called our organization 'Bayalu' [field] informally, to indicate the sense of openness and exploration beyond the walled in spaces of education, and started our activities on 25 June 2008 in Ramanagara.

To overcome the limitations of the classroom and discuss such questions as the efficacy of learning that is limited to the classroom, our commitment, the accessibility of knowledge produced in universities and colleges, the power relations involved in the creation of such knowledge, and *calling* it knowledge in the first place, we started a newsletter called *Bayalu*, as an experiment. Senior writers and journalists, like Dr Banjagere Jayaprakash, Dr K.Y. Narayanaswamy, Dr Nataraj Huliyar, Manjunath Adde and others helped our thoughts evolve and supported us in our efforts.

The *Bayalu* newsletter sought to examine the pressures on teachers and ways of making teaching non-mechanical and interesting, and was inaugurated by Dr Banjagere Jayaprakash at the Janapada Loka in Ramanagara on 8 October 2008. Many people

belonging to other progressive organizations also participated in this event. It was followed by a poetry-reading session, where several young poets presented their works. Following this, we organized a couple of programmes to discuss ways of encouraging students to think beyond their textbooks. We held discussions on different ways of thinking about history and which ones are regarded as valued literary texts. The Bangalore chapter of Bayalu was started soon after. We were keen to engage with the youth and teachers working in various progressive and dalit organizations in the city. More importantly, we wanted to organize teachers and explore the possibilities of taking our efforts forward. We met at the Central College in Bangalore and planned a conference of like-minded teachers within the state to counsel students on careers and progressive living. The first meeting was held in Bangalore at the Government Science College on 19 June 2010. Nataraj Huliyar was the chief guest. Huliyar spoke on the importance of textbooks—how to read them in ways that would inculcate in students a sense of responsibility and how these books can be used then to create a progressive society. Doing this was the responsibility of teachers, he said. About seventy lecturers from across the state attended this meet. We continue to conduct such meetings every month, inviting specialists to address similar topics. For instance, Dr Vasu, who is professor of history in Bangalore University, recently spoke on secularism; Asha Devi spoke about the university as a place for building a progressive society; K.Y. Narayanaswamy discussed the teacher's responsibility to society; Banjagere Jayaprakash spoke on the different ways of understanding and interacting with society; Manjunath Adde spoke on the responsibilities of the youth.

We have also organized poetry readings by Lakshmipathi Kolar and K. Ramaiah. Bayalu has also been associated with 'Katha Kammata', a workshop focusing on different kinds of narrative, organized by K.Y. Narayanaswamy and Bedagarahalli Ramanna.

While our monthly meetings continued regularly, we shared Bayalu's responsibilities amongst ourselves. We also plan to do some research on the issue of 'social boycott' [where dalits in a village are isolated and refused access to water, shops or employment] and its implications. We hope to publish this as a book. The topic we are currently working on is Karnataka's women. We discussed social boycott and the report on the Kambalapalli atrocity [2000] in our last meeting.

Narayan: What are the movements that Bayalu members were associated with before they joined Bayalu? Would you tell us a little bit about how the major social and political movements in Karnataka influenced you?

Bayalu: We have all been active in one student movement or the other before we came together as Bayalu. Owing to our backgrounds—the places we come from, our

education, the [social welfare] hostels we lived in—we have naturally been associated with dalit struggles. Those working in dalit organizations would take us along to their demonstrations and we would sing revolutionary songs with them. It was in these hostels that we learnt about Ambedkar and understood his work and his ideas. Before that, we just took it for granted that, since we were dalit students, we got scholarships in schools. And that's how we grew …

Actually, it was only after we got to college that we began participating in dalit activities. We felt we had to respond through our movements to the atrocities being committed against dalits in the state. So there is no question that we have been greatly influenced by the movements in Karnataka—it is thanks to these movements that we are able to express ourselves in this way.

The dalit movement is perhaps not what it used to be. It is headed in different directions now; but that doesn't mean it is dead. People who were associated with the earlier form of the movement get angry about the factions that have appeared today. But when we—teachers and writers—of the newer generation got together to form Bayalu, we never felt that we were alone. Because of our shared backgrounds in the movement, we felt that our entire community was there to back us. This gave us the confidence to aspire to make a difference through Bayalu. We started off by conducting workshops and seminars … now we plan to move into research. Other than this, we participate in DSS activities, in the women's movement and in all left-wing struggles—peasant movements, land struggles … We have faced arrests due to these activities; the recent arrest of Bayalu members at Chikmagalur is an instance. Protests and struggles are the soul of our endeavour and we cannot give them up. Some of us have government jobs, but that doesn't mean we soften our stand against the government when such issues come up. We continue to be with all these movements. We do not feel that being government employees comes in the way of these activities. We join in the protests because this is our chosen way. In fact, we feel that as teachers in a democratic society this is what we should do!

Narayan: What began as the Bayalu Teacher's Collective is now just Bayalu Collective. But it continues to comprise teachers. What expectations can you justifiably have from today's [elite] education system?

Bayalu: What we have today is actually not very different from the system of education that Macaulay put into place in the nineteenth century. Even though its form has changed considerably, the underlying goals remain the same as before. But we should also note that, from the perspective of the dalits and the oppressed, the system of education put in place by the British has indeed given us a leg-up. We owe our positions as lecturers to this system. Also, although we have experienced humiliation, we do not claim that we

alone have suffered. Some of our members belong to the vokkaliga and forward castes. They also have suffered humiliation as part of their experience of caste and we acknowledge that.

While we agree that the modern education system has transformed the lives of dalits in many ways, we do not glorify it unreservedly. We continue to aspire to the kind of education that Dr Ambedkar insisted upon for the dalits, that Jotiba and Savitribai Phule strove all their lives to achieve for the oppressed of India. We say: we want that the lives that you, the forward castes, have overlooked and ignored—lives that have remained in darkness, lives that mainstream knowledge has been ignorant about over the past 5,000 years—we want these to be recovered and presented as a valuable discourse. We want all communities to have equal access to knowledge and education.

The education system in India was set up by the forward castes and it continues to be dominated by their perspective. Take history, for instance: no history teacher in India would have anything worthwhile to say about dalit history. History books talk of the 1857 mutiny as the first war of Indian independence, but no book mentions the 1818 battle of Koregaon [in which a small Mahar battalion fought against and defeated the ruling Peshwa's army]. We call this the failing of the Indian education system. We have been cheated out of correct knowledge by the distorted history that is taught to us. Dr Ambedkar was aware of this. We feel that if we, Indians, also realize this, the education system can be set right. What is more, an education that develops human values is missing in our system. Also, important occupations such as farming and shoemaking, wielding the plough and the awl, are dismissed as menial. You must give these occupations their due and regard them as the arts and skills they actually are. An education that takes all this into account, we believe, would be a good education. We try to practise this in our classes. While teaching a poem on the subject for instance, we ensure that we describe shoemaking positively, as a splendid art … In our classes, we expose the designs of the dominant ideologies in this country.

For today's parents, education is all about their sons and daughters getting high-paying jobs … it has been reduced to a horse race! Winning this race is all that seems to matter. It's all about 'me, my textbooks, my exams, my results, my job … and that's all my life is about'. While many teachers fail to instil social consciousness among students, many others purposely twist texts around to reinforce existing prejudices. There are teachers who read Devanoora Mahadeva wrongly [i.e., simply as an artist with formal virtuosity] … that's very dangerous. We, on the other hand, ensure that texts are read in socially relevant ways. If we are expected to teach Bhyrappa's novels [a popular writer and advocate of the Hindu way of life] in our classes, we link it to the present scenario.

We also feel that this recent trend of autonomous institutes coming up is extremely dangerous. These colleges are run by people of the upper castes and classes and they perpetuate dominant ideologies unchecked. They have complete autonomy over their examination systems; some progressive-minded teachers who work in these places tell us that all the texts recommended there are by brahmins. This cannot happen so brazenly in the state universities …

Narayan: A report by the Ministry of Human Resource Development reveals that only 8 per cent of dalit students in this country study beyond PUC [Higher Secondary]. Given this background, what's Bayalu's stand on the education of dalits?

Bayalu: Well, we somehow managed to get an education … but [accessing] the same kind of education is difficult today. We can say that it's because of the privatization of education that started in the 1990s. It's not just that … Consider a boy in my village: he'll drop out of school after the eighth standard and decide to work. If we try to convince him to go back to school, he'll refuse. Such instances are many. There's been a shift in how we think of the role education ought to play in a democracy. This is because religious institutions and big capitalist bodies have seized our education system. What has this led to? The collapse of the constitutional and democratic ideals of ensuring education for all, leading to a change in the very definition of education! Today, education is completely job-oriented. Studying in big cities and universities is now a matter of prestige. The security that educated people used to have earlier has melted away. We are troubled by this. Bayalu is looking for alternatives to this situation. We are also seriously considering raising funds to sponsor the education of those who have lost out on opportunities due to lack of money. Since we all have jobs, each one of us is willing to extend our support to poor students. That's our tribute to Ambedkar … an effort to do something for our community.

We have already sponsored the college fees of a dalit girl and a vokkaliga girl. We don't claim this as a great achievement, but it's an important step in our efforts to do away with the practice of bonded labour that continues to exist. We also plan to take up this issue of bonded labour and work with other dalit organizations.

Also, we do not look at the dalit question in isolation, but regard it in the wider context of subaltern thought—dalits as part of the community of the oppressed. We do not differentiate between students in need as dalit and non-dalit. Though no one can change the fact that our communities have been oppressed, we ourselves are more broad-minded and offer help to all those in need, irrespective of their caste. This is a lesson we've learnt from Ambedkar. Considering the injustice he suffered in India, he ought to have had nothing but contempt for it. But instead, he gave this country its Constitution.

Narayan: Most dalit and progressive movements today are found wanting in zeal … they seem to have lost their energy. In this atmosphere, it is noteworthy that Bayalu is working with a lot of enthusiasm. What are the kinds of expectations you have?

Bayalu: We are convinced that intellectual life can also be a source and a location for a movement. Having studied literature and read widely, we are seeking to redefine the very idea of 'movement' through our seminars and workshops … we are trying to understand society.

We sometimes feel embarrassed to say that we are part of a movement. The way we see it, a movement is something on a grand scale, led by a great personality like Ambedkar. We are too small to claim something like that …

We are teachers and our effort is to understand the politics of 'knowledge' in this country. Knowledge today is structured as a discourse of the forward castes. We want to challenge it, break it. This brahminical philosophy represses people by making them accept their inferiority. Through its stories and mythology, it presents this repressive ideology as a way of life, an *Indian* way of life … as acceptable in society. This 'cultural mechanism' must be broken. So, for us, a movement is not so much about an external struggle. An erudite analysis and critique of society is also part of a movement. We are inspired by Ambedkar [his 'back to Buddhism' was a similar approach] and the theory of subaltern studies in this. We concentrate our efforts in undoing the xenophobic ideologies that the education system has been perpetuating. The moral lessons taught to children in the name of history and religion may actually espouse and reinforce the ideas of caste and exploitation. Our concern is to counter such knowledge and build alternative philosophies. We are investigating history to identify the people who have made similar efforts in the past … What were their ideas? What were the techniques they used to communicate their thoughts? We conduct discussions to come up with ways of including their work in our efforts. We meet every week to study and discuss how to develop a different scholarship and a democratic and egalitarian way of thinking in the sphere of education.

We believe in Marxist, Lohiaite and other such pro-human ideologies. We are trying to make Bayalu itself a school of thought that incorporates the essence of all progressive movements and philosophies and can give a direction to our actions—how we propagate these ideas, as teachers and to teachers and students, what we do once we retire from active teaching …

Essentially, we do not claim to be starting another movement to replace the ones that have grown weak. But as teachers, we believe we can make a difference—if we create a few such minds in our classrooms, there will be thousands more like us. The movement is not dead—all that we are and have today is the result of the movement. We

are conveying the ideals of the movement in our classrooms. Our students come from all classes … so we can make a difference.

The understanding of movements as being limited to holding protests and making speeches—as in the 1970s—is a cliché. We must understand why it's become a cliché. We are ready to fight it out in the streets if the occasion demands it. But we believe that today it is activities such as ours that will in fact strengthen the goals and ideals of the movement.

Narayan: But atrocities continue to be committed against dalits; dalits continue to face social boycott in spite of India's sixty-five-year history as a democracy. Atrocities may take place in different ways today, but they continue. How do you look at this?

Bayalu: We discuss such incidents every time we meet. But it's difficult to analyse them and come up with theoretical explanations. We are, however, planning some research. We want to study all atrocities committed in the state and consolidate that research into a report that can be discussed widely. It will be useful to the future generations … something like this book you're working on. Our hopes are to tackle it in this manner; uprooting casteism in one go is impossible …

We are also constantly in dialogue with the leaders of the DSS about what needs to be done to put an end to atrocities. We hope our study and research will provide insight into the reasons for such occurrences—whether such violence is an anthropological phenomenon, or inevitable because it is basic human nature, or whether it is a reaction to the fact that we've finally managed to access education and progress after a period of 5,000 years. This is indeed a big question for us. Even when modern technology is transforming the way information is accessed—the Internet, websites and blogs—social boycotts continue to take place. Two weeks ago [August 2011], on the eve of Independence Day, there was an incident of social boycott of dalits in Dharwad. This is truly a cause for concern. Intolerance in relation to our progress in society—'these people who behaved deferentially towards us, who stood up in our presence, now dare to sit beside us as our equals' seems to be the thought—must be the reason for such behaviour. Caste still has deep roots in people's minds. This must go. We aren't sure how far laws can undo this. If it's a temporary issue, the law might provide some reprieve. But this is something that has to be rooted out of people's minds.

Gandhi envisioned a village-based India and Ambedkar, a modern India. When an informed dalit starts questioning the system and demanding his rights, it aggravates the followers of the village-based model. They don't like it that people who stitched their chappals or cleaned their toilets or beat drums are questioning them all of a sudden … acting like their equals. It's considered wrong. That's how deeply ingrained that tradition is; it's still the same. A little boy in a landlord's household will talk down to

the much older bonded labourer in their house—call him casually by his first name, address him as 'Hey, Thimma', for instance—in spite of his age, while this senior person will address the little boy respectfully as 'swamy'. So it's only with the realization of Ambedkar's modern India that there is any hope for us, that we'll see any light.

People who claim that caste does not exist in our 'modernity' only see its absence in the surface of social manners. But it hasn't disappeared. Not talking about it is merely a form of polite behaviour these days. Pontiffs of all these religious institutions preach against caste and claim that all are God's children, etc. But their very institutions are founded on the system of caste. So, this 'modernity' hasn't undone caste and will not do so.

Look at our local tea shop for instance … the one we passed just now … it is 'modernized' because it has a gas stove and all modern pots and pans. But look at how they use this modern equipment: the savarna castes are served in steel tumblers, while the dalit customers get a plastic cup. What we must observe here is how 'modernity' is used to keep the dalits out. Plastic, considered a sign of modernity, has become the sign of untouchability in our villages.

Many so-called progressive people talk in raised voices about secularism, etc., but they cannot see these problems. The dalit issue has been oversimplified—reduced to a matter of reservations, free hostels, etc. Even these are conceded grudgingly, intolerantly. There is no thought of dalit identity or self-respect. Society just doesn't accept the need to consider it.

Sometimes it's so deeply frightening. If dalits can be boycotted on the anniversary of the country's independence, sixty-five years after we became 'free', what are we in this country? That's exactly what Ambedkar had meant when he said that dalits do not have a homeland … and it still rankles in our minds.

Today, Anna Hazare has started a 'movement' against corruption. I cannot believe they actually call that a *movement*! The people of the middle class are fervent about it but they lack the real anger or personal investment that it takes to start a movement. It's a fashionable thing for them to be seen backing a 'cause'. In this light, the dalits' sense of humiliation, or the injustice of caste, becoming something that is meaningful to society in general, is a very remote prospect. Indians take caste with them everywhere they go. So this 'modernity' has only managed to spread caste, not remove it—it's merely rendered it invisible. Such trends, incidents of exploitation and atrocities, and so on—the Kambalapalli judgment [where the accused were acquitted] for instance—only show that dalits have no security in this country. And not just in Karnataka. Cases of atrocities that receive a judgment in favour of dalits are extremely rare across the country. 'What can you do about it?' is their impudent question. Forget big reasons, they

commit atrocities over small provocations. For instance, they insist that dalits should beat drums on occasions such as funerals or marriages and do other demeaning jobs in our villages—even when these compulsions and activities are banned by the law. If we refuse, they threaten us with dire consequences; they actually quote examples like Kambalapalli and threaten that we will see them repeated. The passivity of the law in this matter has aided them.

'Modern, educated' people also carry caste forward. Look at Anna Hazare's village: the alcohol-drinking, meat-eating dalits there are tied to poles and beaten. If this is the sort of person they follow blindly, one can imagine what kind of people we have in this country.

Ramaiah [Kotiganahalli] was saying the other day, 'Caste is invisible; if we could see it, we could get rid of it easily. But so much of the power of caste is in the mind.' Our efforts so far can be compared to 'breaking the termite hill that the snake lives in'. We merely break the outer structure, which grows back again. But the snake is lodged safely inside. A forward-caste man, who publicly claims to have renounced caste, will practise it unabashedly as his right in his personal life. Only when this changes, will we make any progress.

Caste is a hypocritical thing. People appear casteless on the outside, but caste remains within them. It's a myth that 'modernity' is enough to get rid of this.

Narayan: Let us talk of the many castes among dalits. The scheduled castes comprise not only of holeya and madiga, but hundreds of other castes. There is a lot of strife within the dalits over the issue of internal reservations or categorization. How do you respond to this?

Bayalu: We can see from this that Ambedkar's dream hasn't been realized. The fact that the expectations Ambedkar had from reservations haven't been met is cause for concern. We are not opposed to the idea of internal reservations if that can provide justice for all. To distribute reservations among all the backward castes proportionately is no big deal. But that isn't the real problem. We see the handiwork of right-wing parties, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party, behind the disunity among the dalit castes over the issue of internal reservations. They wish to undo the unity of dalit identity … it is easy to claim that there is no unity among the dalits then. This aids their strategy of dividing society. Another thing is that if the law could set everything right, we needn't have waited for sixty years for justice. There are many small castes—not just holeya and madiga—that are still stuck in bonded labour. Reservations will come in handy only at the time when one tries to get into school or seek a job. If we don't allow a dalit person access to any of these, how can he or she claim reservation? That's where our

anxiety lies. We want that this issue be resolved so that internal reservations can make a difference.

Also, in Karnataka, there are differences among the holeya and madiga over this issue. If one caste feels that injustice has been done to it in comparison to the other, let it claim its due. We do not want to oppose or overlook that. But our worry is, owing to this infighting, what is ours by right is being taken by the 'touchable' dalits [a few castes, such as bhovi or upara, who are not 'untouchable', but have been classified as such]. If we look at the composition of the current Karnataka government, of the twenty-four MLAs belonging to the scheduled castes, save for one holeya and one madiga—for technicality's sake—the rest are all 'touchable SCs and STs'. In the name of internal reservations, the real untouchables have been kept out. While it's mostly these two castes that actually come out into the streets with pictures of Ambedkar strung around their necks and yell their hearts out for their rights, the touchable SCs do not so much as display portraits of Ambedkar in their houses, let alone participate in the struggles. They only step in to access the facilities once amendments are made. We've experienced this in our hostels. If there was a protest organized for something, no one—golla, lambani, wadda, nayak, except for the holeya and madiga boys—comes out to participate in it. At the most they will wear black, but they are always the first to accept the facilities we'd fought for.

To sum up, we would say internal reservation is a sensitive issue and should be understood with tact.

Narayan: How do we sensitize people to this? There is a need to spread awareness, isn't there?

Bayalu: Sensitize … yes … but when we attempt to do it, the trouble comes from the sense of injustice the madigas feel at being left behind historically. They claim that when they demand their rightful share, they are diverted by other things; and it is hard to get away from this argument. The reason that the holeyas have had a higher access to education, and are comparatively better off economically, is because, during the reign of Nalwadi Krishnadevaraya Wodeyar of Mysore, holeyas were given a reservation of 80 per cent in services [which made them among the earliest regimes to open up education for backward castes]. So they managed to get educated and worked their way up economically, to a certain extent. But now, while we believe that the madigas must be given the opportunity to improve their lot, there is no bigger threat than the fact that these two groups fight each other over something that happened in the past. As said before, the right-wingers instigated them to keep up this fight to serve the interests of their power/caste politics. Dalit bureaucrats and politicians forget the larger implications of this and play into the hands of this upper-caste ploy for their personal

gains. Ultimately, what happens is the exact replay of Devanoora's story, *Gandaberunda*.[2] It is hopeless to seek recourse in the law to provide justice, when the legal system is in such bad shape. A report says that over 2,500 people who have used reservation have done so using fake caste certificates. The government is aware of this … it is a government report. There are 290 reports in Bangalore Rural district itself of fake SC/ST certificates being acquired by people of forward castes. This is alarming and requires immediate attention—everyone's attention. It is everybody's social responsibility. It's common to feel compassion for someone, for the hungry person next to you while you are well fed. It's necessary for humanity to have these feelings.

Narayan: Dr Ambedkar had thought that religious conversion would be the solution for the situation of the dalits. Has conversion really liberated the dalits? What are your thoughts on this?

Bayalu: It is a misconception that Ambedkar wished that dalits should convert to other religions. What he said was that we were going back to our original religion. We were always Buddhists. The conversion was merely symbolic … it was to convey a message to the country. But dalits remain dalits. We do not believe that conversion makes a difference to us. Also, Ambedkar's conception of religion is very different from the traditional definition. His Buddha-centred idea of religion is similar to Kuvempu's description of it [from Kuvempu's famous poem collection, *Manuja Mata Vishwa Patha*, or The Religion of Humanity is the Universal Path]. Dalits aren't so culturally poor that they need to convert to a religion [to be able to acquire culture]. There is enough compassion in their own culture to suffice for the whole of humanity. In spite of everything, if people want to convert, it's their choice. Nobody has the right to prevent the conversion of dalits.

Ambedkar felt that people divided by many factors needed a common space to unify socially. He created that space this way. As a dalit, you are counted in the Hindu fold, but you are culturally alienated; you only have memories of humiliation. A rich culture, a memory that you can call your own, is found in Buddhism. So, walk this way, that is what Ambedkar was saying. Moreover, the path of the Buddha is about uniting people in a democratic way. Religion here is a process of humanization. Ambedkar envisioned that freedom from the Hindu religion would mean a separate identity for the dalits—a healthy political and social life. Conversion for him was about acquiring the dignity that is due to a human and thus leading a dignified life. This is the light in which we must understand conversion—not the way communal forces describe it, or use this as an excuse to beat up Muslims and Christians. For a democracy, it is very important to understand conversion in a positive way.

Narayan: Of late, caste-based organizations have increased their activities. All castes —including the backward ones—are holding conferences to assert their caste identities. What does Bayalu have to say about this?

Bayalu: Well, if any of these caste-based institutions spread the message of humanity and check the spread of inequality—say, if the spiritual head of the vokkaliga's Sri Adichunchanagiri Maha Samsthana Matha preaches to his followers that they should treat the holeya and madiga as equals and allow them to enter their homes—we would welcome it. But since this doesn't happen, we oppose it.

Anyway, if we try speaking for the dalits, we are labelled 'casteists'. What caste is the dalit? Where have you placed us in the hierarchy? Is the fifth level [panchama] a caste at all? Most caste-based organizations are trying to pull together and retreat into their own shells, both socially and culturally. The forward castes are strong. What strength do the holeya and madiga have? The backward castes are trying to imitate the forward castes; they want to assert that theirs is a caste too. We are opposed to caste-based religious organizations because they are against the ideals of the Constitution. These matha-run educational institutions are a way of reasserting caste—reinforcing it. This is detrimental to society.

Narayan: Will globalization liberate dalits? Also, with the privatization of government institutions, dalits would lose out on reservation—even now, there is a huge backlog of unfilled reserved seats. What do you feel about this?

Bayalu: Once globalization and privatization is complete, forget backlogs, dalits will not get even the small jobs they do now—not even sweepers' jobs. So the idea that dalits are being liberated through globalization is completely false; Bayalu does not accept it. Small spaces may open up here and there but there's nothing more horrible than understanding it as the ultimate liberation. If globalization could have aided the progress of dalits, it should have happened by now. But social injustices have only gone up; there's less participation in education. All this is just empty talk.

Narayan: We talk about 'countercultures'. But is it necessary for dalits to turn towards older traditions, such as Manteswami, Malemadeshwara, Junjappa, etc., to build a separate cultural identity?

Bayalu: Our opinion about counterculture is different. We feel that what we have is a culture and calling it 'counter' is wrong. Our culture is not against anything or counterposed to anything … it's our way of life. It is something we have been practising. However, we have also studied the Manteswami and other traditions and we work with them without drawing on the concept of counterculture. These are very rich

traditions. Dalits have a rich culture and we are proud of it. If one finds some aspect of it 'inhuman', it is because it is understood wrongly. The community is trying to set this right. Casteist society has imposed these 'inhuman' elements in it. For instance, Marihabba, the festival of the dalit village goddess, is read as being symbolic of the curse on a dalit man for marrying Mari, a forward-caste woman, where the sacrificial buffalo is supposed to be this dalit reborn to redeem himself each year. This is a brahminical interpretation.

Again, in the Chikkaluru Jatre, the Dharege Doddavru [Elder of the Earth] associated with the deity there—if you read it politically, who was this Elder of the Earth? He was the one who bestowed land upon the landless. His eternal light was seen on the garbage heap. The cultures of the dalits and the communities close to them are full of such heartening memories. So, as dalits, our memories are not limited to our untouchability, but go beyond that to our glorious history. Dalits have enjoyed importance and authority in the past—and this without forcing themselves on anybody. Thanks to subaltern studies, we are tracing our roots through these traditions; roots, yes, but not in a romantic mode.

There have been many errors in understanding the Manteswami and Malemadeshwara traditions and we implore our scholars to relook at them. These are independent cultures and not constructs meant to oppose or confront something. Manteswami needn't be considered part of the sharana or the bhakti movement. Banjagere Jayaprakash's thesis is about just that, about how epics have been corrupted … how these social and cultural traditions have been hijacked to reinforce caste-based domination.

Narayan: There are accounts of miracles in all these epics—be it Manteswami, Malemadeshwara or Junjappa. How do you think we should understand these culturally?

Bayalu: These miracles are metaphors for the confrontation of authority by the heroes in these epics. They stand up to structures of dominance in a way that common people dare not. So people glorify their achievements and build tales around them as miracle-makers. These heroes have brought justice to the people and aided them in their struggles, so they become the gods of the people. It's necessary to understand our cultural leaders and our 'gods' in this light.

Many people have been responsible for this understanding of history and culture, but the movement has been like a school—it has taught us everything we know. Reading and understanding this literature is a movement in itself. The movement may not be running like it did in the 1970s, but it has created these perspectives and this body of knowledge

for us. Unfortunately, dalit literature of the present is yet to let go of the 1970s' movement. It is caught up in those memories.

Basically, like we said earlier, the process of creation of knowledge—and importantly, *who* creates knowledge—is vital for us. Powerful communities and castes have created the social atmosphere they desire by giving their ideas the sanction of 'knowledge' and diffusing it through the education system. Our quest is to challenge these 'knowledges'. We, the teachers in Bayalu, use our classrooms as laboratories for this experiment. But that is only a small part of our work. We join hands with all progressive-minded organizations and movements for the sake of humanity—be it dalit, women, communist or sexual minorities.

PART II

TELUGU

Sivasagar (K.G. Satyamurthy)

Sivasagar is the pen name of K.G. Satyamurthy—Comrade SM—who cofounded the People's War (PW) party, along with Kondapalli Seetharamaiah in 1980. Asha Menon, who interviewed Satyamurthy in 2011, describes his party life thus: 'He visited villages, organized squads and wrote poetry under the pseudonym Sivasagar. His writing inspired many people, including [the revolutionary poet] Varavara Rao … SM steadily rose in the party. At one point, there was a 25,000-rupee reward on his head. In 1972, when PW was still with the CPI (ML), SM was mistakenly pronounced dead; and in 1974, arrested by deceit.' Born in 1931 at Sankarampadu, a hamlet of Polukonda near Gudivada in Andhra Pradesh, Khambham Gnana Satyamurthy worked with the undivided Communist Party of India and also with revolutionary leaders like Charu Mazumdar in Srikakulam movement. He passed away in April 2012 at the age of eighty-four.

He was secretary of PW's Central Committee from 1982 to 1984. He left the party as a result of internal differences. He emerged from underground life and appeared in public in a VIRASAM[1] conference in 1990. In an interview given to *Choopu* in 1996, he replied thus to a question on the caste issue: 'I have been close to the communist movement since 1948, and I became part of the Naxalbari movement in 1969. From that time until 1984, I advocated class politics. Once you eliminate class oppression, caste will automatically disappear, I believed. I did not have any real understanding of the caste question because of this limited leftist way of thinking. In 1984, a majority of the members in the Central Committee and I presented a theoretical document as part of the internal debate. In this document, we declared that the caste question has a strategic importance in the Indian revolution.' The result was that he was required to leave the party. After he left, Satyamurthy focused on building a broad dalit democratic movement. He conducted a series of classes at Achanta in West Godavari district, visited Timmasamudram, Chunduru, Cheemakurti and other such villages, and moblized dalits to fight against atrocities. In 1991 he called for the formation of a Samata Volunteer Force to defend dalits from upper-caste attacks. Gowtham, who was inspired by him and worked with him in the 1990s, observes: 'As a dalit who was also an experienced political leader, Satyamurthy played a key role in the dalit upsurge of the 1990s. He formulated some powerful slogans that conveyed dalit self-respect and tried also to build a broad bahujan democratic movement.'

In the early 1990s, along with the activist and thinker Oo Sa (U. Sambasiva Rao) and others, Satyamurthy established the ML Centre. Its magazine, *Edureeta*, contributed to the debate on dalit politics and the relevance of Marx and Ambedkar. Satyamurthy also

formed the Samajika Viplava Vedika (Forum for Social Revolution) to take up social issues. In 1994, he, along with many other leading dalits from Andhra Pradesh, joined the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), but left due to differences with Kanshiram and launched the Bahujan Republican Party (BRP) in 1995. He also started and was for some time editor of *Ekalavya*, a dalit journal that has made an important contribution to dalit thinking. He was actively involved in the struggle for the commutation of death sentences awarded to two dalit youth, Chalapati Rao and Vijayavardhana Rao, in 1996. The campaign raised the question of why such a large proportion of those being awarded such sentences were dalits. Satyamurthy was also closely associated with Veeranna, who left the CPI (ML) Janashakti to form the Dalit Bahujan Communist Party. He supported both the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti and those fighting for an independent Telangana state.

The dalit writer and critic Kalekuri Prasad sums up his contribution thus: 'SM's contribution was really at the theoretical level. His way of thinking was important in the fight with the Left. It also helped to shake deep-rooted ideas among people at large. He did not contribute much to the actual building of the dalit movement. What he did was to ask questions that gave strength to those who tried to build the movement. He provided the information and the tools. His desire was to organize dalits along the lines of the Black Panther movement. But he had no takers for that.'

By the 1990s, Satyamurthy was already a well-regarded poet in Telugu. 'Sivasagar is a poet who was a product not only of revolutionary consciousness, but of revolutionary struggles. He has to be recognized as a multifaceted genius, next only to Sri Sri, not just in revolutionary literature, but in the entire body of Telugu literature,' the literary critic Che Ra (Chekuri Rama Rao) wrote.[2] His influence as a poet on dalit writers is tremendous. Acccording to the literary critic Gudipati, Sivasagar's career as a poet can be divided into four phases. The fourth phase is the dalit phase. In this phase, Gudipati observes, 'the poem "Nadustunna Charitra" [Ongoing History], written in 1994, captures Sivasagar's new journey as an activist and poet; so also his 1996 song "Nallati Sooreedu" [Black Sun]. Years ago, he had given a direction to revolutionary literature through the song "Narudo Bhaskaruda" [You are Like the Sun, Bhaskara, 1976], now he has set out a new path for dalit literature with "Nallati Sooreedu". His new poetry built the foundations for dalit aesthetics [in Telugu].'

Sivasagar suggested that dalit writers needed to search for literary forms in dalit life to develop the dalit literary movement. Translated here are extracts from *Ambedkar Suryudu* (2004), a book written as a response to Marxist writer Ranganayakamma, which also elaborates Satyamurthy's understanding of Ambedkar.

A Sun Called Ambedkar: Excerpts

Translated by Anant Maringanti

The Mahad Struggle

The Mahad Struggle took place on 20 March 1927. It was a big step in the dalit freedom struggle. Untouchables rallied in the town of Mahad in Kolaba district in the then Bombay state under Ambedkar's leadership for their right to gain access to drinking water from a tank called Chadar in Mahad town. It was a dalit struggle for self-respect. And also a struggle for human rights.

Prior to this, Ambedkar had focused his energies on inculcating a sense of dignity and self-respect among the untouchables. But planting the seeds of self-respect in people's hearts is not enough. The true test of a fighter's calibre is the moment he steps into the fighting ring and tastes the first blow. The only way to assess an opponent's strength is to engage that opponent in battle. The untouchables' struggle for drinking water rights in Mahad town was such a test case for Ambedkar: a way to gauge the untouchables' preparedness to engage in battle and get a sense of their own power as well as that of the caste Hindu society.

The Mahad struggle was a testimony not only to the preparedness of the dalits, but also to Ambedkar's mettle as a leader. It was the first large rally that he personally led. He chose the site of struggle and the key actors with careful forethought. Why did he choose the Chadar tank in Mahad of all places? Ambedkar had intimate knowledge of the town. There were a large number of army pensioners among the mahars of Mahad, who brought courage, commitment and discipline to the mobilization. Many of them had participated in social activities alongside Ambedkar's father. He was personally acquainted with a number of them. Other than the untouchables, there were several upper-caste supporters to his cause. Mahendranath Tipnis, Mahad municipal chairman; A.B. Chitre, kayasth activist of the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha; and B.M. Sahasrabuddhe, in charge of Social Service League, were all active upper-caste participants in the Mahad struggle. Chitre and Tipnis were later elected as members of the Legislative Assembly from the Independent Labour Party founded by Ambedkar. Sahasrabuddhe became the editor of the weekly *Janata*.

Ambedkar gave careful thought to the framing of the issue. The Bombay government and the Mahad municipality had already issued orders permitting dalits to fetch drinking

water from Chadar tank. Therefore, Ambedkar's rally was not in disobedience of the law. Building on a previous campaign by the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha for drinking water rights in Chadar tank for untouchables, Ambedkar simply demanded proper implementation of the law.

As a culmination of all this preparatory work, during 19–20 March 1927, Ambedkar and his associates organized a conference of the untouchables of Kolaba district in Mahad town. Some 5,000 dalits and their sympathizers from the rural areas of Maharashtra and Gujarat attended the first day of this meeting. On the second day of the meeting—demanding that the Municipality's decision that dalits be given access to water from Chadar tank be implemented—Ambedkar led 10,000 people to Chadar tank, to drink the water there and assert their entitlement.

Caste Hindu society reacted swiftly to this affront. Goondas attacked dalits immediately and brahmins purified the Chadar tank with cow dung, leading to police intervention. News of the untouchables in Mahad drinking water from Chadar tank hit the headlines in the state of Bombay. Less than a month from that time, the fortnightly journal, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, became the main tool for organizing the dalit movement. The dalits took the retaliatory attack by the Hindu fundamentalists as a challenge and resolved to make their claim to drinking water a permanent entitlement.

Against this backdrop, the second Kolaba district untouchables' conference took place in Mahad in December 1927. Between ten thousand and fifteen thousand dalits and their sympathizers attended the conference. The conference resolved that 20 March be commemorated as Untouchables' Emancipation Day. It called for an oath committing people to fight for dalit human rights.

Let us now see what the pseudo-Marxist Ranganayakamma (PMR) has to say about the Mahad struggle. In the eleventh chapter of her book, she writes about the road struggle, the Mahad tank incident, the burning of the *Manusmriti*, the struggle to enter Kalaram temple and refusing to do unsanitary work. She has taken the material for this from the fifth volume of Ambedkar's collected writings and interpreted it through her skewed lenses.

She makes light of Ambedkar's interpretation of these struggles as exploding a dynamite in the foundation of Hindu society. Barring the 'refusal to do unsanitary work', she finds nothing of value in any of these struggles. According to her, these movements are not capable of shaking the foundations of the Hindu establishment. That capability, according to her, resides only in the 'refusal to do unsanitary work', because 'it directly and marvellously revolts against exploitation and division of labour.' She claims that her interpretation is authentic Marxism. But let us be clear: PMR's views on dalit movements are anything but Marxist. What she peddles in the name of Marxism is economic reductionism. Let us take a sampling of her writing. She speaks of destroying

the old relationships of production. As if relationships of production are a self-evident object, sitting on the table, which one could voluntarily choose to destroy. According to Marxist principles, such a destruction of the relationships of production happens only through revolution. And revolution is a process in which the retrogressive superstructure has to be destroyed first. Only then does it become possible to destroy the economic foundation. Anyone with a nodding acquaintance with Marxist–Leninist texts should know this much.

PMR's understanding is so shallow that she does not seem to even know that the superstructure is composed of the government, army, law, political institutions as well as philosophy, literature and fine arts, and other forms of ideology. Relations of production are the economic base. It is the totality of these relationships that constitutes the economic structure of society. But then it is unlikely that PMR would have read any of the Marxist–Leninist foundational texts. If she did, she probably has not understood them. If she has understood them, she has probably forgotten them. What is surprising, however, is that our own Marxist–Leninist leaders and intellectuals are strutting around celebrating PMR's book. She could not have wished for more.

Let us look at this closely. PMR, who is clearly clueless in these matters, seems to be labouring under the misconception that production relations means the relationships between slaves and their owners, landlords and farmers, capitalists and workers. In Marxist understanding, there are three dimensions to production relations: 1) management of means of production, 2) the role of human beings in production, and the relations between them and 3) distribution of the produced goods. It is clear from her book that she is completely innocent of this complexity.

From the road struggle to the burning of the Manusmriti and from there to refusing to do unsanitary work—all these struggles must be carried out simultaneously. To be meaningful, the struggle has to be carried out in all spheres of life. But for economic reductionists like PMR, economic struggles are everything. For her, the Manusmriti-burning is inconsequential. Such is her Marxism. Such is the Marxism that the upper caste–brahminical intellectual traditions in India have produced.

Hindu society is built on the bedrock of the Manusmriti. It is the foundation of unequal Hindu society. It is both a symbol and a concrete manifestation of inequality. The Manusmriti not only rationalizes and defends the institutions of caste and untouchability, it also enshrines them in the law. It shrouds them in divine sanction. It gives a theoretical foundation to the unceasing war that caste and feudal societies carry out, to ensure the economic, political, social and cultural oppression of the lower classes and castes. It is a brahminical penal code.

In Ambedkar's words, the burning of the Manusmriti by the untouchables on 20 December 1927 under his leadership was a courageous act. It was a frontal assault on

the fortifications of Hindutva. Economic reductionist PMR cannot see any efficacy in it, however. It is through the Mahad struggle that Ambedkar and his associates educated the untouchables against the teachings of the Manusmriti. They brought together the drinking water struggle of Chadar tank in Mahad with the awareness that the Manusmriti, which is the basis of inequalities in Hindu society, needs to be rejected. They passed resolutions in that second conference to link the struggles over immediate problems with the ultimate goals towards which the struggle was directed. PMR concludes thus: the struggles of untouchables did not invest even one per cent of the energy expended on temple entry movements on struggles to challenge exploitation of labour. The movements of the untouchables do not carry this perspective even in a vague form, she feels.

This is nothing but dishonesty, ignorance and arrogance. Temple entry was never an important issue in the history of dalit struggles. Ambedkar rejected temple entry movements directly after the Kalaram temple-entry struggle. 'Why should those who oppose Hindu society itself be struggling to enter Hindu temples?' he asked. Thus, it is sheer folly to say that dalit movements spent a lot of time and energy on temple-entry movements. It is equally, if not more, mischievous to suggest that dalit movements did not challenge the exploitation of labour. PMR can make such claims with elan because she does not know that, under Ambedkar's leadership, dalits fought against the Khoti feudal system and the Mahad watandari system, and that they also fought in a number of workers' struggles.

One final point needs to be made to nail PMR's lies. She borrows material from the chapter on dalit movements in the fifth volume of Ambedkar's collected writings, but ignores Ambedkar's crucial political message. Ambedkar says to the dalits: while there is no possibility of overcoming these difficulties completely, there is a way to mitigate them. That way is through politics. Untouchables are blocked from using their political power, and so, that is where the struggle should lead to—enfranchisement.

Why did PMR ignore this message? Is it because acknowledging that message about political power will directly go against the false representation she is keen on making? To obscure Ambedkar's political message, she says that Ambedkar made dalits slaves of reservations. That is why she must try to block the sunlight from shining through by holding up her palms.

Ambedkar was not a born genius. There is a history to his ideas. At the beginning of the decade of 1920s, Ambedkar had not yet arrived at a clear position on the Hindu religion. He had taken a decision to be sympathetic to workers' and peasants' struggles. As his movement was not anti-Hindu initially, the conference was organized in the name of the deity of the town—Veereswara. The pandals were decorated to honour the god. In the second conference, they prayed to God to help in the realization of the conference's

resolutions. The conference revolved around Hindus' rights. It hoped that Hindu society will rid itself of untouchability and purify itself. At that time, Ambedkar was of the opinion that the untouchables should give Hindu society another chance. For that reason alone, he did not ask for separate electorates for dalits. Instead, he submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission on 29 May 1928, asking for composite electorates with reserved seats for dalits. He had not yet come to any conclusion on Jotiba Phule's thesis that dalits were the aborigines of India. Ambedkar did criticize Gandhi for prioritizing Hindu–Muslim unity over the abolition of untouchability. Yet he was deeply respectful towards Gandhi. In the Mahad conference in December, Gandhi's photograph was displayed prominently. Ambedkar said it was not a small thing that Gandhi was sympathetic to their cause at a time when nobody else was attentive to their demands. Yet Ambedkar also embraced workers' and peasants' struggles cordially. So much for PMR's falsehoods.

Marxist Thesis on the Origins of Caste

The caste system is not unique to India. It is also not unique to the Hindu religion. It can be found in Muslim Pakistan, Muslim Bangladesh, Buddhist Sri Lanka and Hindu Nepal. It is widely prevalent in South Asia. We must locate its geographic specificity at the subcontinental scale. The origins of the caste system can be found in India before the Hindu religion became hegemonic. Hindu ideology merely consolidated it.

Let us consider for a moment whether caste could indeed be the product of the Aryan invasion or if it was a product of the consolidation of economic division of labour, as some intellectuals suggest. If that is so, how can we explain the fact that invasions and division of labour have taken place everywhere in the world, and yet it is only in South Asia that they lead to the caste system?

Morton Klass (1980) argues in favour of considering the particular social and cultural characteristics in South Asia that pre-existed the caste system and which determined the direction of social evolution. His theory on the origins of caste is based on an investigation of concrete social and cultural forces. Gail Omvedt has called this a Marxist and historical materialist interpretation of caste.

The Subcontinent's environmental diversity was such that agriculture, hunting and food-gathering, pottery, weaving and shifting cultivation became possible under particular conditions in particular places. In each environmental zone, one occupation developed and thrived giving rise to many tribes, each specializing in a particular kind of production. Each tribe was place-bound and specialized in only one activity. In other words, division of labour did not take place internally within a tribe, but rather among tribes. Archaeological evidence in some sites supports this argument by showing how stone implements were made by one particular tribe for a number of other tribes.

Similarly, some tribes made pots for all tribes. Gregory Possehl has shown that the people who settled in Lothal, the port town in Harappa, befriended hunters and food-gatherers. Towards the end of the third millennium and beginning of second millennium BC, the tribes of South Asia evolved into a large confederation with complex interdependencies. These were the first intimations of caste groups. They were based on equality and community. After the growth of surplus production, after invasions, after kingdoms and cities got established, gradually, these groups or tribes evolved into jatis and got integrated into hierarchical societies. In the new society, exploitative relationships began to be expressed. An ideology emerged to uphold them. Tribal characteristics were embedded into jati. Tribal society was accommodated into the needs of an agrarian society and civilization. It must be noted that tribes were not constituted as economic and political units before the emergence of the State. Societies before the State were fluid, and without a clear form. Tribes got consolidated as such in defence against the State.

Four main races can be discerned in this South Asian society—Aryan, Mundari, Sino-Tibetan and the Dravid races. Of these, the Mundaris were matriarchal and had a sense of equality. The Khasis in India are a relic of the Mundari culture. Santhal and Ho societies were patriarchal societies. The Aryans or the Indo-Europeans were also patriarchal. They were nomadic. They loved war. At first, there was no caste division among them. But after coming to India, the caste system became a part of their lives. Sino-Tibetan groups had a diluted form of caste division derived mainly from notions of purity and impurity.

The literature of the Sangam period reveals diverse production relations that developed under diverse environmental conditions. These relations were referred to (in Tamil) as ‘tinai’. From the foregoing, one may infer that the occupations that developed in the third century BC according to environment are: 1) tribes living in fertile lands in villages known as ‘ur’ with plenty of water where they could take to the plough; 2) tribes that lived in the hills, forest people who knew sorcery, soothsaying and sometimes worked in fields when they came out of the forests; 3) cattle breeders who were known as ‘ayars’ and sheep breeders known as ‘kolavars’; 4) those who practised fishing; and 5) those who hunted in the plains and forests, known as ‘inar’, ‘marnar’ and ‘davir’.

This division according to occupations (early forms of caste) was accompanied by a hierarchy, where those in the lower social order were considered impure. These notions of purity and impurity originally derived from the idea of a sacred power. People believed that unless this sacred spirit or power is controlled, it would turn dangerous. They feared that, in the process of carrying out their occupations, they came in contact with sacred spirits, and in this way sacred spirits entered into human relations. If they

were not controlled they could turn dangerous. For example, they believed that the leather worker came in contact with the spirit of the cow in the process of removing the hide; those who participated in cremations came in contact with the spirit of the dead person; those who washed clothes came in contact with the spirit in the dirt, which could turn dangerous. The drummer came in contact with the spirit in the drum; the spirits of women could turn dangerous for men. Patriarchy was all about controlling women's spirits so that they would not turn dangerous. People beat drums in war to keep dangerous spirits in check.

In Sangam literature, one can see the fundamental three-fold social division that gives us a clue to understanding caste division: the dominating people; the dependent people; and the fallen people. Those who fought wars were dominant, those who worked were dependent and those who carried out unclean work were the fallen. This division resonates with the division in Nepal: 1) those who wear the sacred thread; 2) those who drink toddy; and 3) those who should not be touching water.

Whatever the religious explanation for it, division is a social reality.

In order to explain caste system fully, however, we need to take into account untouchables alongside the four castes—brahmin, kshatriya, vaisya and shudra. Only by bringing them all into the same framework, can we explain the true nature of hierarchical society. The varnadharma of brahmin, kshatriya, vaisya and shudra is not a division of labour as it is often made out to be. It is a division based on notions of purity and impurity, and even though untouchability got consolidated only in the fourth and fifth centuries, its foundations were there in the origins of caste itself.

Thus, one may conclude that the first forms of caste can be found in the environmentally determined social groupings among ancient Dravidas. The relationship with 'sacred powers' that played such an important role in their social imaginations, turned upside down once cultivation using iron ploughs began to create surplus production; male members and warriors ascended to dominance. 'Dangerous spirits' became the impure and slid down to the bottom rung of society. This development happened after the Aryan invasion … The brahmins formulated the notion of pure and impure and occupied the top of the hierarchy … This strengthened the caste system. In the period between the sixth and ninth centuries, due to a complex struggle between ideological traditions, feudal and monarchical groups came into dominating positions and consolidated the varnadharma and also the caste system.

To sum up, for an explanation of the caste system in South Asia, we need to take into account not only environmentally determined occupational divisions, but also invasions and violence in the course of surplus extraction, as well as notions of purity and impurity.

Caste System and Its Historical Evolution

In the early Dravidian cultures, we can glimpse the origins of the caste system. It evolved from the consolidation of (economic) divisions, patriarchy and the incipient State. Traditional theory, which supports the caste system, does not take into account this evolutionary process. It does not look for historical stages in its development. It argues that caste has existed from time immemorial, and that there are no ruptures in its evolution. Racial theorists argue that the caste system evolved only after the Aryan invasion. Economic and environmental determinists argue that caste system has been relatively immobile and static. Radical theories of caste, formulated in the light of Marxism, argue on the contrary that there are clearly identifiable historical stages in the development of the caste system.

In this regard, we can identify four distinct periods in the Indian social structure before the rise of class society. These are:

1) [Approximately] 500 years of the existence or survival of Indus Valley Civilization;
2) Indo-European domination in the Gangetic plane (nearly a millennium after the Sindhu civilization);
3) Consolidation of the caste-feudal structure and the struggle among Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious traditions;
4) Caste-feudal period of the Middle Ages—Hindu domination, entry of Islam, and Islamic rule till the beginning of British colonialism in the sixteenth century.

Through all these periods, the caste system got entrenched and underwent transformations.

On Caste Feudalism

Caste feudalism evolved in phases—at the end of the first millennium as jajman system in North India, balutedar system in Maharashtra and ayagar system in the Dravid region. Caste feudalism did become hegemonic by overthrowing the slave system. It was not an independent economic system based on the vaisya and gahapati peasantry, as explained by R.S. Sharma, nor was it an autonomous peasant economy. Historians claim that it is a system in which peasants and artisans (oppressed castes) controlled the means of production. This is not correct. Caste restrictions were strong among them. These producers in the economy were divided into jati groups and ordained to follow caste rules. They would get only a share in the farm produce. Bonded labour was in fact

caste-based bonded labour, and it was an integral part of the caste system. Although there were regional differences in the nature and extent of this unfree labour, dalits were subject to the worst form of exploitation and repression.

1. Caste-feudal State did not extract surplus primarily through repression. Brahminical religious ideologies aided the process by functioning as psychological police. Even though the State did not have any proprietary rights over land, a share was extorted for the king in the produce. This right of the State to take a share in the surplus was known as watan in Maharashtra. In the Vijayanagara Empire, it was known as the amara right. Violence, repression, exploitation and brahminical ideology made up the State. Varnashrama dharma, the fulcrum of brahminical ideology, became the ruling ideology for the medieval state. Brahmins became key players among the exploiting classes. The feudal lords and brahminical ideological lords became allies against oppressed castes and classes. (There were internal struggles among them as well.)
2. Although brahmins and kshatriyas were the ruling castes in caste feudalism, there was an important distinction between them. The brahmin caste was a jati group. It was not a status. The kshatriya caste was not a jati group. It was only a status. All those who were known as kshatriyas did not belong to the same jati group. Shudras who established the State became kshatriyas. They were peasants. Some kshatriyas were from tribal groups. It was state power that endowed them the status of kshatriyas.
3. We should be attentive to regional, environmental differences when we analyse caste feudalism. We should also be attentive to the relationships between the regions: river valleys and delta regions which could produce surplus on the one side and the dry/barren regions on the other. Some regions pursued others to gain control over diverse means of production and resources in plains and forests. These differences were internalized in/through material and social relationships. Class–caste division was acute in fertile regions. These differences were relatively muted in the dry regions. Jajman relations were internal to village life. There was an exchange relationship between villagers, forest dwellers and cattle breeders.

Local specificity played an important role in shaping exploitation and oppression. In the relatively infertile regions, even though there were hierarchies, peasants of lower status worked on their own farms. Dalits also owned lands. Watan lands were given in exchange for caste-based services. Jagirdars, inamdars, talukdars, deshmukhs and desiyas were non-working landlords. They were a constituent part of the State. In villages, the karanams and munsabs (patels, patwaris and kulkarnis) were local

representatives of the State, though they also represented the peasant as a group. Within this structure, some families accumulated surplus over time. Other families acquired large estates through watandari rights. These families and individuals became part of the caste-feudal system, but not as representatives of their caste. Brahmins were different in this respect. They became part of caste-feudal exploitation as a caste. A feudal class emerged among brahmins towards the end of medieval ages, mainly in irrigated areas. Among others, rajputs in the Gangetic plane, nairs in Kerala, vellalas in Tamil Nadu, reddys in Andhra became managers who did not have to work. They managed agriculture and irrigation and commanded the complex caste society. Dalits toiled in farms as virtual slaves. Compared to the dry regions, there were no peasant warriors in irrigated regions. The peasantry had lands in the fertile region. They did not work themselves. Another section toiled for them. That section had no lands, and did not have any rights over their own labour. These two sections are two different classes. And they also have different caste identities.

There was a difference between brahmin and non-brahmin villages in the way surplus got distributed. Farm produce was divided into two unequal parts—melavaram (the larger part) and keelavaram, the smaller part. Melavaram went to the administrative sections and keelavaram to the farm workers and farm managers. Vellala landlords had to pay a part of their produce to the administrators. Brahmin landlords did not have to make that payment. Vellalas were originally farm workers. As surplus accumulated, they gradually became farm managers. Yet the fact that they had to pay the better part of their produce to the administrators indicates their lack of freedom. Brahmins always got the better part of the produce. They were not equated with the managers who got the smaller part. Thus, while some people laboured and produced surplus, others enjoyed it as religious leaders, occupiers and administrators. State power also gave people the power to extract surplus. State violence, domination and sociocultural relations in religious institutions worked hand in hand to loot surplus production. This happened not just in fertile lands but everywhere—in dry regions, grasslands, forests and hills—wherever people lived. Brahmins participated in this exploitation as a caste. Non-brahmins participated as powerful individual families and dynasties.

There is another fundamental difference between brahmins and non-brahmins. Brahmins as a caste were not exploited. The majority of the non-brahmin ‘dominant castes’ were exploited people. In the traditional Indian social structure, the power of the dominant classes and the unequal relations among different castes were crystal clear. It is comparable to feudal structures elsewhere in the world. In medieval Europe, a third of the peasants were landless workers. But in India, this unequal system has consolidated into the caste system. In this hierarchical society, dalits have been at the bottom.

Pseudo-Marxist Ranganayakamma's Theory of Economic Force

Even though Ranganayakamma calls herself a Marxist, she has not given us a Marxist historical perspective. This is how she explains history: 'Whether we call social division by the name of caste or class, if we want to understand the origin of these differences, we have to go back to the time when ancient tribes began to fight among themselves for natural resources. Later generations may not be able to tell which tribe fought with which one, where and when. But that is the beginning of history. That is where victories and defeats begin. That is where labour and relations of production begin. That is where slavery and proprietorship begin. That is where land, property and exploitation begin. That is where the law, and administration and punishments for slaves begin; where kings and States begin. We have to imagine this ancient history. This is the beginning of class conflict. Exploitation of labour is the foundation of this system.'

Ranganayakamma's interpretation of history is not Marxist. It is a theory of economic force. Friedrich Engels subjects this theory to intense criticism in *Anti-Dühring*. As Engels explains, a new system cannot be built by one tribe defeating another. To get the defeated tribe to undertake production, the victor should be able to supply the means of production. Before a slave society is formed, production has to reach a certain level. After all, slaves have to be fed, even if only at the bare minimum survival level.

Ranganayakamma never mentions means of production. Neither does she acknowledge the spirit of the *Communist Manifesto*, where Marx and Engels suggest that the history of mankind is the history of class war. How shall we understand history from the Marxist point of view? The history of kings is not history. Only that which explains how means of production and relations of production change in time is history. By means of production we mean the implements, the skills to produce food and other material needs for social reproduction. By relations of production we mean the social organization that transfers surplus to the ruling classes. Means of production and relations of production change over time. It is the task of history to explain how this change occurs systematically. This is not economic determinism. Culture is dependent on surplus production, but it has a role in shaping history. Society often resolves material contradictions through cultural conflicts.

If the above is the Marxist approach to history, you will not find any trace of it in Ranganayakamma's writing. Her challenge to Ambedkar does not reflect this understanding. Precisely because there is no Marxist approach in her understanding, Ranganayakamma has not been able to understand Ambedkar theoretically. In order to understand and assess Ambedkar's historical writing, we need to first understand his approach to history.

Ambedkar's Approach to History

Ambedkar rejected the idealist story of creation that says: 'This universe was an incoherent place. At the beginning, the holy spirit (god) became personified and created brahmins, kshatriyas, vaisyas and shudras from his face, shoulders, thighs and feet and put man in god's place.' Ambedkar tried to explain how *man* created caste. Thus Ambedkar was a materialist. However, he was not able to analyse the historical dynamics of caste. He was not able to discern the origins and growth of caste in the evolution of society. He was not able to understand caste from the perspective of the role that it played in different social structures. Ambedkar's 'man' did not have any relationship to the means and relations of production. This makes Ambedkar a mechanical materialist but not a historical materialist. This shortcoming is reflected in Ambedkar's writings. Ranganayakamma's chief failure lies in the fact that she was not able to mount such a Marxist criticism of Ambedkar.

Bojja Tharakam

Bojja Tharakam's family home is in Kandikuppa, a tiny village located at a point where the Godavari joins the sea. It lies in the Konaseema area of the East Godavari district in coastal Andhra Pradesh. Between the village and the sea, there was no habitation, except for the fisherfolk shacks along the shore. His father, Bojja Appalaswamy, was a teacher and a political figure who, as early as 1942, had set up a unit of the Ambedkar-led Scheduled Caste Federation in the area. At a time when most schoolteachers had studied only up to the third or fourth class, this SSLC-passed and trained teacher was something of a legend. He was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Madras state in 1952 and to Andhra Pradesh Assembly in 1955. Tharakam's mother, Mavullamma, had never been to school, but had learnt to read and write with the help of her husband. Tharakam was born in 1939.

Appalaswamy had established a primary school in the village for SC children so that these children would not have to walk the ten kilometres up and down to school that he himself had been forced to trudge as a child, and this is where Tharakam studied during his early years. Later, he moved to the Pithapuram Raja's school in Kakinada, which had a hostel. 'Most of the first children to get an education in the Godavari area went to Pithapuram only because of that hostel facility. In fact, there were two hostels, one for boys and the other for girls; the girls were mostly orphans,' Tharakam observed. 'Devulapalli Krishnasastri, a noted Telugu romantic poet, was one of the honorary wardens. The attraction between him and my father was mutual. Back in the day, my father was one of the youngest students there; what is more, he could sing well and had learnt a number of kirtans from my grandfather. Krishnasastri who belonged to the "rebel" religious formation, the Brahmo Samaj, was also musical. It was a relationship that lasted for many years. My elder brother is named after Krishnasastri.' Though the school was meant for everyone, dalit students were given particular encouragement. The girls' hostel was a palatial building—it now houses the Kakinada Medical College—and when he was questioned about its grandeur, the Pithapuram Raja is said to have replied: 'These are not orphans; they are my children. Where would the children of a raja live, if not in a palace?'

Bojja Tharakam himself is named after the distinguished social thinker and district education officer, Kambhampati Tharakam, with whom Bojja Appalaswamy stayed while he was doing his teacher training. The story goes that Raghupati Venkatratnam

Naidu, the principal of Pithapuram Raja's college and social reformer, and later vice chancellor of Madras University, had once seen two girls begging at a railway station. Moved by their plight, he sent someone to bring them to Madras, adopted them and gave them an education (they completed MA, BEd). Kambhampati Tharakam wanted to marry one of them, but he had to break all ties with his family to do that because he was from an orthodox brahmin family. 'He used to close his letters to my father with the phrase "your father",' Bojja Tharakam recalls, adding 'When Vijayabharathi and I were married, he conducted the wedding.' Theirs was a secular wedding, conducted without religious rites.

'My father imbibed the spirit of social reform from the Brahmo Samaj and his political spirit from the land struggles that he was involved in. We grew up listening to his criticism of the rajas and the zamindars, who were also the strength of the Justice Party in the Godavari area. When Gandhi came to Kakinada sometime in the 1930s, Father was a volunteer. He was among those instrumental in setting up the early twentieth-century adiandhra movement in this region, and was active in the Field Labour Cooperative Society in Amalapuram taluk, the most important land movement of the time. This whole question of land is important. The British used to allot land to the Society, which had the right to cultivate, but not to sell. Some of the really fertile islands in the Godavari Delta had been occupied by the upper castes. The British evicted them, assigned the land to the dalits (known as the depressed classes at the time) and encouraged them to educate their children. However, the upper castes would not allow dalits to cultivate or harvest the crop, and there were pitched battles between these two groups all through the 1930s and '40s. As a result, in 1944, when Ambedkar toured the region, these people were well prepared to hear what he had to say. The reception he received was electrifying. His speeches ignited the entire Konaseema area. So when my father stood against the Congress in the elections, he won with an easy majority. When I was a child, my father was fully involved in these issues, and he was always out on tour. He had engaged two teachers for the school, and my mother looked after everything at home single-handedly.'

Tharakam's grandfather, Govind Das, was also a well-known and respected figure. He had worked in Rangoon and, with the money he saved, bought some land in the village and constructed a two-storey house—the only one in the area. He was a religious person who wore saffron clothes and toured the area preaching and singing. He had followers from different castes—kapus, kammas, fisherfolk. Their house, Tharakam recalls, functioned like a mutt, with hundreds of people coming through. Once a year, there would be a big gathering and they would sing through the night. 'My politically active father and religious grandfather tolerated each other. I do not remember any quarrels. Perhaps that is why my father tolerated me,' Tharakam observed wryly.

Musical talent runs in the family. Both Tharakam's father and grandfather were poets and sang well; so are Tharakam and his brother. 'During the summer holidays, we wrote and staged plays. All three generations were active socially. At night, Father would meet with the villagers and teach them about Ambedkar. I used to go along and sing. These activities continued until 1952, when Father started a new life in parliamentary politics. Possibly because of the rich cultural heritage that I brought with me and certainly because my father was an MLA, I was never personally subjected to untouchability. I have no personal experience of it, but Father had a very interesting story from the late 1930s of his battle with the famous Surabhi Natya Mandali [a highly popular Telugu drama troupe, known for its mythological and folk plays]. In their shows, there were separate places for panchamas and women. Upper-caste men could buy chair tickets. Appalaswamy arrived on his bicycle, dressed as always in a full double dhoti and clean ironed shirt. For three days, he held up the Surabhi performance at Kandikuppa, insisting on a chair ticket. Word spread that he was doing so and a huge crowd of young people gathered. Finally, on the fourth day, Surabhi gave in. With the chair and bench classes now open, hundreds of others also bought tickets.

'After primary education, my brother and I joined McLaren High School in Kakinada. In 1958, I began college studies. I got admission in Kakinada Engineering College, but was not allowed to join since I was underage. During my college days at PR Government College, I became a student activist of the Radical Students' Union. I became its district president. My brother and I took up several activities between 1954 and '58, including a thirty-day dharna at Ramachandrapuram against the SC hostel management for not providing proper food. The leaders went around, collected rice and gave it to the boys to cook. Every year we celebrated Ambedkar's birthday.' Tharakam wanted to do an MA in Maths and Statistics, but found that Osmania University did not have a Masters programme in Maths and that he would have to go Andhra University. 'But I did not want to leave Hyderabad, where I had become involved in many cultural activities, so I decided to study law and enrolled in the evening college.' His classmate [whom he married in 1968] Vijayabharathi's father, the well-known dalit poet Boyi Bhimanna, who was the government translator, offered him a day job as junior translator. Motukuri Johnson was also working in the department. Together they formed Sulekha Niketan, a cultural organization that produced plays, staged ballets and dance dramas.

Tharakam entered a new phase in his life in the mid-1960s when he moved to Nizamabad and embarked on his career as an advocate. He soon realized that the people there had many problems and that there was a total absence of legal assistance to help them fight atrocities, being falsely implicated in cases of petty theft, or false cases filed by landlords against farm hands, and so on. The very first case he fought involved two farm servants. The landlord had blocked the flow of water from the canal into their

land, diverting it all into his fields. No one dared to touch his bunds. These two went out at night and cut them open. The landlord found out and attacked them. They retaliated. He filed a case against the farm hands, who were jailed. 'Their relatives came to me with great hope. I was the son of an MLA, a student leader. I filed a bail application—on my own; my senior was a civil lawyer—and luckily bail was granted. The village was overjoyed. It was a great victory for them. For me, it was the first step on a path I have travelled ever since. Work was heavy. I was not earning much, but we managed. Bharathi had got a job in a women's college in Nizamabad; and there was what Father had left us.'

In Nizamabad, Tharakam connected up with Battula Punnaiah, a lecturer in one of the colleges, who had started an organization of SC students. Tharakam recalls organizing a large meeting on Ambedkar's birthday, where he spoke about the connection between Ambedkar's writings and the student's lives. The effect, he says, was electrifying. It was as if a totally new world had opened up for them. 'Dr Ambedkar actually helped me reach the people,' Tharakam observes.

'Inspired by the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra, which was at its height in the late 1960s and early '70s, we formed the Ambedkar Yuvajana Sangham [AYS], a district-level organization with branches in many villages. They held public meetings in the villages in front of the panchayat office or in a school. It was an altogether new experience for the dalits—having a meeting like this, especially for them—a meeting they could think of as their own. These organizations made it possible for the dalits to imagine that they could challenge the authority of the reddy landlords. Take for example what happened in 1971. A farm servant was killed by a landlord in Palem, a village thirty or forty kilometres from Nizamabad. We received the information from our branch in Palem. But how were we to get there? One of the students told us that his father had a lorry and we managed to get it. It was the very first time a whole group had gone like that—a group of dalit students in their own lorry, to a village where an atrocity had taken place. We made a banner, raised slogans. The landlords sent a message saying that we would be finished off by the time we reached Armur. We paused momentarily, then said to ourselves, "Nothing will happen." Nothing happened. As we passed each village, our spirits rose. When we arrived in Palem, we were received like heroes. We decided to hold a public meeting condemning the attack and denouncing the reddy landlord for killing his servant. Such a thing had never happened before. People were scared (and so was I), but I assured them that nothing would happen. They picked up their sticks and we took out a rally. It was a tremendous success, and word spread immediately over the whole district.

'Everything was new: each step a new step, each move a new move, each word new. It was an unforgettable experience both for the students and for me,' Tharakam stresses.

Sometime later, the Rytu Coolie Sangham (RCS) began working in the area. Tharakam's knowledge and understanding of both Ambedkar and Marx ('I think of myself as both an Ambedkarite and a Marxist, and the task of synthesizing these philosophies was challenging; my 1980 book, *Kulam–Vargam*, is based on these experiences') made it possible for the AYS and the RCS to work together closely. 'RCS certainly had the organizational strength, but without AYS, they would have had no footing. Sadly, they have never acknowledged this,' Tharakam observes. In the early 1970s, both groups were involved in the occupation of 200 acres of government land in Pachchalanadukuda, which some reddys had illegally occupied. It was a tough fight. 'Atrocities rained on the people. Villages were attacked; houses and crops destroyed, women molested. One day, some dalits returning to the village on their carts were waylaid and attacked. One of them, thought to be dead, was thrown into the bushes. The village is about twenty kilometres from Nizamabad town. People came to my house in the dead of the night. Together we went to Punnaiah's house. He knew the DSP in Nizamabad who happened to be dalit. The DSP responded immediately, sending a police contingent to the village early in the morning. They shifted the injured to the hospital. This had a huge impact and such things did not happen again. Dalits and BCs were both involved in this struggle. Many such issues were taken up, largely against rich and influential reddy landlords, and in some cases, velamas. Initially, they were hesitant to eat together, but after two or three months of continuous struggle, and with gentle encouragement, they began to share their food.

'Right through this period, I was constantly away from home, travelling by bus, bicycle, bullock cart. Getting the injured into hospital, registering cases, arguing in court took up all my time. Bharathi, who had by then completed her Ph.D, had become vice principal. In addition, she had to manage the home and the children. Punniah was supportive—helping us contact officials, providing whatever money he had—and so were the RCS people, Krishna Reddy and Yadgiri. A big part of the activity was sustained through the courts; and this was considerably before what is generally thought of as the period of civil liberties activism during and after the Emergency. I used to encourage people to go to the police station to file cases. "It does not matter that you cannot write, file an oral case," I used to say. Both as a lawyer and as a political leader, I became a real presence. I would finish work in the field, change my clothes and enter court. Before my time, people who had been attacked by reddys had to be defended by reddy lawyers. All that changed. Fortunately for me, the Bar was uncertain about my caste. My grasp of both Telugu and English, my bold arguments and a predilection for quoting from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, confused them.'

As president of the AP Beedi Workers' Union in Nizamabad, Adilabad and Karimnagar, Tharakam was involved in the forty-day strike demanding the implementation of the Beedi and Cigar Workers Act of 1964. His involvement with the

RCS landed him in jail during Emergency in July 1975. He was detained under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act and the Defence of India Act till July 1976. During this phase, Tharakam was vice-president of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) and also a member of the Revolutionary Writers' Association, VIRASAM. In 1978, he contested from Nizamabad as an independent candidate supported by the CPI-ML. He moved to Hyderabad, but remained active in the AP Ambedkar Yuvajana Sangham, the SC Welfare Association and with the work of the Civil Liberties Committee.

Tharakam began his career as an advocate in the district court of Kakinada in 1965. He moved to Nizamabad and continued his legal practice (1968–78). In 1978, after Vijayabharathi got a job in the Telugu Akademi, he shifted to Hyderabad, where he worked in the AP High Court and fought many cases. He was appointed government pleader in 1984 for the AP Administrative Tribunal. He resigned this post in protest against the Karamchedu massacre and filed a private case against the kamma landlords. He was one of the first two dalit advocates to be designated senior advocate of the AP High Court. In his long and distinguished legal career of forty-six years, Tharakam has argued in the lower courts, the Andhra Pradesh High Court and the Supreme Court.

Tharakam was a key figure in moving dalit groups from presenting memoranda to the government or trying to get things done through their contacts with ministers and officials, to actual fact-finding, writing up of reports and holding press conferences. 'All this infused a great deal of confidence in the victims. In many places, people themselves began reporting incidents, filing FIRs and so on. The Padirikuppam attack on dalits in Chittoor district in 1984 [this took place prior to the much better known Karamchedu carnage] is a good example of this kind of work,' he explained.

'In 1985, when Karamchedu happened, we were prepared. All democratic forces came together in that struggle—I could mobilize their support. The challenge was to sustain the mobilization, sustain the struggle. The formation of the DMS [Dalit Mahasabha] was a great event. Help and assistance arrived from all over the state, and we were able to build an organization of dalits fighting for themselves. DMS represents the dalit confidence that we can fight these battles ourselves. I stayed in Karamchedu for two months. DMS inspired real confidence. We organized the first all-India dalit protest in Karamchedu. It is a great feeling to have been part of that struggle.'

Tharakam was the founding president of the AP DMS and continued in this position till 1991. He was the state convenor of the Chunduru Struggle Committee and in 1989 became the founding AP general secretary of the Bahujan Samaj Party. He resigned from BSP in 1994, opposing its alliance with the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. Tharakam also got involved in the struggle against atrocities in other states—especially Karnataka and Bihar. 'We were close to the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti [DSS] in Karnataka, and to groups

in other states. In 1987, we organized an All India Dalit Writers' Conference. About a thousand writers came and we brought out a souvenir that featured a number of black writers also. I specially remember Paul Chirakkarodu.' He edited the *First All India Dalit Writers' Conference Commemorative Volume*, 1994.

Tharakam is a poet, writer, translator and political commentator. His first collection of poetry, *Nadiputtina Gontuka* (The Voice That Gave Birth to the River, 1983), was written in jail during the Emergency. A second collection, *Naalage Godavari* (The Godavari Is Like Me), came out in 2000. His booklet, *Poleesulu Arrestu Cheste ...* (If the Police Arrest You … 1979) was first published by Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, and later serialized in the magazine *Commando*. It sold over 30,000 copies. The Hyderabad Book Trust republished it in 1983 and it ran for thirteen editions. His other books include *Kulam–Vargam* (Caste–Class, 1996), *Brazil Prajala Bhooporatam* (The Land Struggles of the Brazilian People, 2003), *Nela, Nagali, Moodeddulu* (Land, Plough and Three Oxen, 2008) and *Dalitulu–Rajyam* (Dalits and the State, 2008). His English writings include *Constitution: Coup d'état* (2000). Tharakam translated important works by and on Ambedkar into Telugu much before the Maharashtra government brought out the Ambedkar volumes. A founding trustee of Dr B.R. Ambedkar Memorial Trust set up in 1984 to disseminate Ambedkar's philosophy, he was also involved in the official project of translation of B.R. Ambedkar's writings into Telugu and was co-editor for volumes one, four and ten. He was editor of the dalit little magazine *Nalupu* (1991–94) and, since its foundation in 2008, of *Neeli Jenda* (Blue Flag; meaning, Ambedkar's flag). A novel, *Panchatantram* appeared in 2012.

Need a Weapon

Translated by N. Venugopal

I don't know figures that
show me the moon in a mirror,
since I never get paid for my work.

I don't know the fruits
of idleness that the horoscope foretells
since I never get a square meal
even after a day's hard slog.

I don’t know
how to climb to the sky or count the stars
for I don’t even get
a couple of grains on the ground.

I cannot see rainbows on cheeks;
I can only see the colour of red in tear stains.
The flag of humanity dips, again and again,
like a kite that does not fly
however hard you try.

I can only see oceans of tears,
brothers sunk in the mire of hunger,
sisters molested, humiliated and raped;
fences of caste that distance man from man
hierarchies that prevent one heart reaching another.
I can only see mountains of troubles and boulders that block.

Both demons and gods churned the waters,
but the nectar was shared between the gods.
The demons toil, guard and harvest,
but the gods filch the crop!
Sweat for one, profit for the other,
such is the legacy of the ages.
They said, ‘the gods have come down.’
Sages descended.

Whatever they do finds favour with the gods.
When they burnt down forests with flames of penance, the
gods rained nectar from the skies.
Neither then, nor today,
does hard work find such reward.

This is not the history of one day.
It is a history of thousands of years. Experience
accumulated over time.

I am the man who walks
carrying this ancient burden.
The overflowing Ganga and Godavari
cannot fill the crevices in my heart.
Neither the Indus nor the Kaveri
can quench my thirst.

How many people visited me, Swami,
How much they talked!
They said, ‘the soul of every person is the same,’
but kept me away from everyone else.
They said, ‘happiness is for all.’
I never knew what pleasure was.
They said, ‘you are me and I am you,’
but having said that, excluded me.
You and me never became ‘we’.
Pollution was never washed out.
Are all these just words?
Bundles of water?
Why have you and I, part of the human family,
remained apart for millennia,
keeping the barriers and walls intact,
raising them even further,
putting up fences around us,
posting selfless cobras as guards,
unleashing racing dogs that sermonize,
preventing all efforts to uproot the fence,
and break barriers.

With these sinking legs and hands stuck in a quagmire of trouble,
how can you ask me to climb the mountain to heaven?

It is not enough to build hopes as fast as clouds,
it has to rain.
It is not enough to promise milk and honey,
it has to satisfy at least half of our hunger.
For years I have found people
comforting me with soothing words and song,
But none there is who holds my hand and
walks with me fraternally.
For many years
people are held to the nooses
bound within lines, kept in exclusion.
These nooses and lines have to be removed.

I want to smash these barriers,
fill all these gulfs.
For that
I don't need word or song.
I need an axe and a crowbar.

Which work was done without a weapon?
Rama and Parasurama
Vishnu and Krishna
Siva and Sakthi
Maisamma and Pochamma,
every one of them has a weapon.
Why shouldn't I have one?
I am in search of a weapon
to make all equal.
To distribute everything to everybody.

Gandhi, the *Mahatma*!

Translated by N. Venugopal

Who are you
Mahatma
Karamchand Gandhi?
A half-naked fakir
or a half-ruler magician?
A friend of the depressed
or a relation of the moneybags?
What is your address?
Is it the colony of the bhangis or the palace of the Birlas?

O Great Soul!
It is said that you wore only a loincloth,
taking pity on those who could not afford clothes.
Your mask is perfect.
But did you, on any single day,
suffer the cold?
You donned the role of a poor man,
but did you, on any single day,
gulp down his gruel,
or remain without even that?
Indians indeed fear
sadhus and sants.
Afraid of their powers,
they fall prostrate.
Truly, you discovered
the magic trick of becoming

a mahatma overnight.

Dear maharshi,
is it necessary to disrobe women
and sleep with them in your bed
to test your manhood and learn self-control?
We don't need such
restraint, such altruism.
You did not treat woman as equal;
you regarded her only as an instrument
to test the heat of your blood.
Your act was one of sheer feudal superstition.
Who called it celibacy?

Wherever one goes, one finds
banished human beings,
sacrificial corpses,
untouched lives.
When the nation marched
leaving them behind,
you were stopped and asked
'What about us?'
What did you tell them, bapu?
What did you do for them?
You said 'untouchability should end.'
But 'castes must remain.'
How can stench be removed
when the heap of dung remains?
You named them harijans.
An empty name indeed.
Losing all strength they
wandered around your feet.

With a cloth around
the loins, stick in hand,
comes the pretence of a poor man
walking the colonies of untouchables.
Teaching them to chant the name of Hari, you destroyed their might.
Your smile is indeed suspect.
You never slept in a poor man's house,
or shared a coolie's meal;
you never cleaned the dirt of an untouchable,
O Raghupati Raghava!
In truth you slept on the serpentine bed
of glory, an ocean of rich milk
surrounding you, you announced
deliverance to the depressed,
not the path to get a morsel.

Unable to get a square meal
after toiling the whole day,
when they asked for a hike in wage,
you preached: 'Do not raise such issues.
The true character of a coolie lies in
working with no thought of wage.
Those who profit must help those who labour.'
How fantastic your sermons were!
You turned the wheel of history backwards,
O great preacher of non-violence.
Karamchand Gandhi,
you broke the back of labourers
with a huge stick.

You spoke of going without food
to those who spend half their lives

with stomachs empty.
Masses with their troubles have followed
sages and saints, mahatmas and mendicants.
Never stopping to ask
where they were headed,
they followed anybody who led them.

But if they had stopped and looked at the path
where would you be?
At such a crossroads, you
won't even be able to walk and
will turn into a statue of stone.
The people will leave you
and march ahead. When they know
life is in movement, they will not
hover around graves.

Where do you live, Great Soul?
In the colony of the bhangi, or the palace of Birla?

Caste–Class: Excerpts

Translated by S.V. Srinivas

Caste System

There can be little doubt that, in India, caste is the foundation on which society is organized. Caste alone determines the economic, social, political and cultural status of people. The first question Ram asked Bharat when the latter came visiting during his exile was not about the health of their parents, but 'Are the kingdom's subjects carrying out the vocations determined by their varnas?' It is amazing how strictly ordered it all was! The occupations of castes became caste occupations—people were simultaneously born into a caste, as also an occupation. It was only when constitutional

provisions eased the restrictions on the mobility between occupations that we began to see some change. However, although we now have the freedom to reject a caste occupation, society does not exactly welcome or encourage such a move. When the situation necessitates the shift to a new occupation, people have to make sure that movement is still within the varna order. That is to say, when someone takes up a new occupation, it has to be similar to the original caste occupation. Working castes, for instance, have to remain in occupations that require manual labour.

Taking up work that is completely unrelated to the caste occupation causes some difficulties, to say the least. If a plough-wielding peasant's son picks up a pen, he is viewed as a criminal. Likewise, if a sickle-maker's son holds a sword, people will be astonished. When someone who washes clothes decides to weave them instead, there is no end to the amazement caused, discouragement received and objections raised. There is loud lamentation and much foreboding if the hands that hold a broom pick up a book. Each of us can come up with countless examples of how people responded.

Even after Independence, the context and prevailing conditions were such that there was no entry in schools for the odd student from an untouchable caste who wanted to read. The restrictions were no longer legal, but social. When untouchable children joined a school, upper-caste children stopped going to that school. Teachers—inevitably from the brahmin caste—discouraged people born in untouchable castes from attending school. After all, they would rather not ruin the school for the sake of the few.

In stark contrast to these scenarios, when an upper-caste person takes a job that is usually done by lesser castes, he receives much sympathy. His difficulties cause collective grief. Although this person no longer retains his respectable caste occupation, he never loses recognition as a member of the caste. Regardless of occupation or merit, he retains his caste identity and the status it accrues.

Such is the primacy of caste that it has become a touchstone of a person's worth. A good-for-nothing man who happens to be born as a brahmin or kshatriya, remains a brahmin or kshatriya for life. Similarly, a meritorious untouchable or a brilliant backward-caste person remains untouchable or lowly. A brahmin who begs is nevertheless a brahmin, but a backward caste teacher's social status does not improve. A kshatriya can remain a prince (kshatriya) even without a cent of land. A backward-caste landlord retains his caste's low status. In other words, regardless of a person's economic capacity, his worth continues to be determined by the caste he was born into.

The four varnas became innumerable castes, but remain four distinct categories. The first three of these retained their entitlements while the fourth splintered manifold, each acquiring a single occupation that it was entitled to take up. These entitlements predetermined which caste occupation would be superior to another. Some occupations —and those who carried them out—were perceived to be higher in the order.

When occupations reified into castes, the brahmin retained his occupation and status. Teaching, priesthood, office in royal courts continued to be his occupations. Even the kshatriya who did not have kingdoms to rule retained control over land in rural areas and perpetuated his domination. Vaisya remained a businessman—the occupation was a caste too. Shudras were service providers in the varna order and their caste occupations were limited to offering services to the castes higher in the order. The shift from varna to caste did not improve their status.

Since caste determined occupation, the number and diversity of trades did not expand at the desirable rate. There was all-round stagnation. Education was limited to brahmins, and the result is that science and technology in India are pathetic in comparison with other countries. Research necessary for human development was not carried out because access to scientific knowledge was restricted to a single caste. Knowledge and technology were not in the hands of those who needed it.

Disaster resulted from assigning the task of protecting the country to kshatriyas alone: India was invaded several times by sundry raiders and traders. When a kshatriya dynasty was destroyed, no one remained to lead the battle because others were not allowed to do the kshatriya's work. Robert Clive claimed that when he invaded India with his small army and began to annex parts of the country, non-kshatriya castes remained witnesses. The peasant working on the field continued to plough the land and did not even try to confront the enemy because he thought it was not a part of his assigned occupation. Such is the restriction imposed by caste, and the divisions it wrought, that invaders came in numbers that you could count on your fingers and yet ruled over vast multitudes.

The problem of caste is also manifest in the experience of other occupational groups. Status was determined not by the success in occupation, and the wealth that accrued as a result, but caste. Moreover, even the opportunity to engage in better-paying trades was determined by caste. Initially, land and agriculture were in the hands of brahmins. When agriculture began to develop and generate wealth, a few castes—reddy, kamma, velama and kapu—gained total control over it. But its benefits did not trickle down any further, to castes lower in the hierarchy. These shudra castes have continued to extend their domination over agriculture.

As for business and finance, needless to say, a single caste [vaisya] controls it. Although brahmins had, in the earlier periods, dominated finance too, they could not retain their domination over it. There was a time when temples also functioned as treasuries. Money, gold and valuable ornaments were stashed in temples. All this wealth was under the control of the priestly class. Since all wealth was concentrated in temples, the first thing that every invader did was to pillage temples. Some temples were repeatedly raided by invaders. The primary reason for targeting temples was the

wealth they hoarded, not to destroy Hindu religion. With the depletion of temples' wealth, brahmins lost their hold over the economy. Their control was now limited to the domination of people's minds.

The ruling alliance was once between kshatriyas and brahmins. Now it is the brahmin–bania alliance that rules. To this day the brahmin controls our minds, while the bania our hunger.

When electoral politics was introduced in India, this domain too was the exclusive prerogative of brahmins. But as the intermediate shudra castes—reddy, kamma and velama—took over agriculture and gained a hold over the village, they gained political power too. Brahmin control over politics now passed on to reddys and kammas. But *caste's influence* was extended even into politics. Just as the brahmin alone cornered positions of political power in the past, today none but a reddy or a kamma can acquire political authority. This does not, however, imply that brahmins have lost their control over society. The intermediate castes have no doubt dented brahmin monopoly, but they have managed to do so by re-centring caste—and by extension the brahmin model of domination—as the foundation of political power.

Indian politics is far from praiseworthy. Political power began to be used for selfish ends instead of addressing people's needs. Politics has not been inclusive—it has shrunk, grown putrid with the corruption of politicians. The primary reason for this state of affairs is the limited accessibility of all these domains to a handful of castes.

No country has resources comparable with those of India. Mineral wealth and human resources are plentiful, the climate is ideally suited for human habitation, a variety of crops can be grown, the people are hardworking and nature too is cooperative. Despite this, India is a poor country, indeed one of the poorest in the world. Caste, which determines different walks of life, has effectively stunted development. Caste is the primary reason for this state of affairs.

Medicine declined because experience-based knowledge was not passed on to others. Even as India failed to excel in the domain of knowledge production, its economy and agriculture lagged behind. All these fields failed to grow due to the monopoly of a few castes, which in turn undermined talent and hindered innovation. Discouragement killed the spirit of enquiry. The suppression of initiative freezes mobility. Wealth is not generated under these conditions. Caste is the primary cause for this state of affairs.

The spirit of cooperation vanishes when there are restrictions on coexistence and people are prevented from interacting freely with each other. When there is no guarantee of sharing, there are no opportunities for working together. Because there was caste, there could be no unity. Without a sense of unity, there can be no sense of nationhood. We don't exist as a nation, but as many different castes.

The caste system prevents us from living like members of a society and a nation. Surely, we should rid ourselves of caste mentality that blocks our social life and divides us as a nation.

[…]

Communist Movement and the Abolition of Caste

How can caste and class be abolished simultaneously?

Marxists argue that caste struggles belong to the lower order reformist movement, while class struggle alone is revolutionary. That view is incorrect. Both caste and class struggles are constituents of the revolution. The abolition of caste is as revolutionary as classlessness. Anti-caste struggle is primarily a revolution of the mind. However, the abolition of caste is not about ideology alone, but also about material transformation. Caste struggle is a mental–material revolution, while the focus of a class struggle tends to be limited to materialistic considerations.

Even in the nationalist period, when the abolition of caste was, in theory, considered to be a part of the larger agenda of societal reform, few upper castes made it a part of their political programme. In fact, it was family reform, not societal reform that was the focus of reform movements of the nationalist era. Widow remarriage, sati, child marriage, bride price (kanyasulkam) and other such issues are, broadly speaking, issues of family reform. Abolition of caste, like the abolition of untouchability, is true social reform—it has to do with the society as a whole. There was a publicity campaign against untouchability, but no one owned up the abolition of caste as a part of their political programme. Even Gandhiji spoke out against untouchability, but went on to say that the caste system was good and should remain. None of the reform-minded felt the need for abolishing caste. On the contrary, they belonged to castes that benefited from the status quo.

The Communist Party led two major movements—in Telangana and Srikakulam—in addition to launching a cultural movement to take the party's ideas to the people. It is possible to argue that the Telangana peasant struggle and Srikakulam movement, and indeed the party itself, had from the earliest days been built on the support of backward castes—indeed, the most oppressed of castes. It were these castes that responded to the party's call and carried the movement on their shoulders. They sheltered leaders who were underground and bore the brunt of the brutal state repression that followed. They were the majority among those who lost their lives for the party. However, the party did not address caste, the primary problem of this majority. It never bothered with untouchability either.

How could communists tolerate and even support a system that treated fellow workers worse than animals? The party ignored issues related to caste altogether, saying that they would be dealt with after classlessness was achieved. Its trusting and credulous supporters went along with the party, convinced that untouchability and caste itself would vanish once the land problem was solved. They came to believe that it was alright to live without dignity and live in the hope that some land would come their way as the struggle intensified. Among many, the party's influence notwithstanding, there wasn't even consciousness of the indignity of their condition. They were under the impression that the indignity and disrespect they faced had to do with some natural condition they were born with, not the creation of forces that were thoroughly exploiting them.

Recalling Marx's statement, 'Tell the slave that he is a slave and he will break his chains,' Ambedkar said: 'Tell the untouchable that he is untouchable and he will break his chains.' However, there were no Marxists to conscientize those who bore the insults and indignities of the caste system. When others spoke of the need for anti-caste struggles, the communists sidestepped that issue saying, 'Does caste [struggle] feed the poor? We need land. Let us fight for that.' Caste didn't wither away. Land didn't come their way either.

The communist leadership has to be held responsible for this. The upper-caste leadership of the movement proved to be incapable of undermining the interests of the leaders' castes. Although leaders recognized the importance of anti-caste struggles in their individual capacity, they could not draw up a plan of action to fight caste.

Not just communism but every movement in India has to confront the caste question. The issue of caste cannot be ignored or sidestepped. Unfortunately, the few parties that take up people's problems don't have a clear understanding of caste and are thus unaware of how domination works in our society.

Brahmins once had unquestioned control over land and political power. They retained their social supremacy even after losing both. They also dominate the cultural superstructure, which is linked to economic and political power. Today, communist parties are led by the two castes that seized land and political power and also adopted the model of societal domination from the brahmins. Understandably, these two non-brahmin castes will attempt to protect their interests. So long as the leadership remains in the hands of upper castes, no attempt will be made to bring about foundational changes. Communist leadership coined slogans that appealed to labourers. Workers who desired changes rallied behind the slogans.

No doubt there have been some changes, but the revolution that was supposed to transform their lives never came. In Srikakulam and Telangana too the story repeated itself. If caste had been on the agenda of communists—from the early days of the

formation of the party to the present-day movements led by revolutionary parties—and if an anti-caste programme had taken shape, the problem of caste would not have been as acute as it is today. There would have been an unimaginable transformation of society.

G. Kalyana Rao

Kalyana Rao traces the roots of his life as an artist and activist to the cultural lineages of his parents and to the magnificent cultural heritage of the dalits. Both on his mother's side and his father's side, there were good singers, actors and storytellers, 'great artists, gifted litterateurs'. They created the famous veedi natakam, *Chenchulakshmi*, which tells the story of a spunky chenchu woman who marries Ahobila Narasimha, a mala—but only after he passes her tests and agrees to *her* terms. Rao's unlettered grandmother, whose tales influence the narrative structure of his acclaimed novel, Antarani Vasantam, was a renowned story teller. She would weave together traditions and current events to create stories that lasted for up to a month of evening sessions in the village.

Kalyana Rao was born in 1945. His mother died shortly after his birth, but he spent his early years in her village, Sambasivapura Agrahara in Nellore district. 'The village Ennela Dinne in the novel *Antarani Vasantam* [Untouchable Spring, 2000; excerpts from which we have translated here] is based on this place, and the episode in which Yellanna goes to see a veedi natakam performance on an actual incident in my early life. My father's village, Alakurapadu, is in Prakasam district. Both my parents were malas, but Mother was a practising Hindu and a devotee of Siva, while Father was a teacher and a Christian pastor. Their forefathers are from the Palnadu area. Mother is a descendant of Nayakuralu Nagamma, famous for having overcome the challenge to her leadership by Brahma Naidu and for building the well-known Siva temple. The mainstream account focuses on Brahma Naidu, but the dalit story is centred on Nagamma, who, they say, is a mala brought up in a reddy family. Our family used to sing the stotram in that temple.

'After Mother died, I was nursed by two women: one a washerwoman and the other a madiga; Grandmother used to put me to sleep with her songs. There were many stories about Mother, whose name was Balanagamma. They say she wore her sari down to the ankles like the upper castes [malas and madigas were required to wear it at knee height] and that she stood up against the village karanam [brahmin; village revenue official]. Hers is a family of proud people. Subhadra in the novel is based on my mother.

'I moved to Father's village, Alakurapadu when I was eleven. The village is largely communist and was an important centre of the Telangana Armed Struggle in the 1940s. Though Father was a teacher and a pastor, he was sympathetic to the communists and was actually arrested in 1952 for this. Cultural life in the village was truly vibrant. I

never read [Russian writer Maxim] Gorky's *Mother*. I listened to it being read aloud in the village when I was twelve. The schoolteacher used to read to the community for a couple of hours each evening. I remember listening also to *Fathers and Sons*, *Malapalli* and a number of other Russian, Chinese and Telugu novels, short stories and plays.

'Since the communists were a strong presence in the village, caste feelings were not so pronounced. For instance, our people did not automatically rise when an upper caste person came by; there had been a struggle for the right to water; we had access to the pond in the middle of the village. In fact, I was thirteen years old, when I mentally picked up the red flag and joined the Communist Party.'

Kalyana Rao was fortunate to have had as his teachers scholars such as K.V. Ramana Reddy and Manikya Rao in Jawahar Bharati College,Kavali, in the 1960s. There, he also became secretary of the Students' Federation, which was affiliated to the undivided Communist Party. 'After the division, I joined the CPM and then moved closer to the Naxalites who were active in the Srikakulam area. Charu Mazumdar is still my hero.'

In 1973, while holding a job at his alma mater he married Amruta, a neighbour from his village. 'We had waited six years.' The college principal presided over the marriage, and students bought them their wedding clothes and were at the railway station to send them off on the small holiday they took. His wife's grandfather had been active in the Telangana Armed Struggle. After his MA in Political Science, Kalyana Rao got a scholarship to study in the IAS Coaching Centre in Chennai and passed the Group 1 written exams, but—like so many other dalits—failed the interview. 'I had been wavering between becoming a bureaucrat and joining the movement, and I made the decision at that point.' In 1978, he started Kalyana Rao Tutorials in Ongole, which, largely owing to his personal reputation, became very successful and is now a residential college.

Kalyana Rao's involvement with the people's movement has been as a writer and cultural activist. He was very active in the post-Karamchedu movement and was secretary of the radical writers forum, VIRASAM, for over six years and president for another two. He has been actively involved in the editing of their journal, *Arunatara*, for over ten years now. Kalyana Rao was one of the three emissaries of the People's War in the peace talks between the Andhra Pradesh government and the Naxalites during the years 2004–05.

Most of Kalyana Rao's early works are plays and short performance pieces that he wrote or developed in the context of the movement. He directed the plays and often also acted in them.[1]He has also published an anthology of short stories, *Nenemi Adiganani* (What Did I Ask?, 1997), and a long narrative poem, 'Kaalam' (1998). His most

important work, however, is *Antarani Vasantam,* a novel that uses autobiographical material and writes a history of Andhra Pradesh that centres on dalit life. It is a history that takes issue with the canonical version, its personnel, its sources, the events it regards as central and, most of all, its judgements. The novel also breaks with bookish forms of 'standard' (upper caste) language, instead heightening and shaping the idiom, rhythm, vocabulary and metaphor of the 'ordinary' language, which is the language of everyday interaction in dalit neighbourhoods, into an original literary form. 'Listen carefully when ordinary people speak,' he once said to an interviewer, 'the sentences are short; they are rhythmic … it feels natural, like wind, water, light.'

Kalyana Rao spent fifteen years preparing to write *Antarani Vasantam*. 'The question I am asking is: where does the true revolutionary come from? What is it that has gone into his or her making? To Gurajada and Gandhi, I say, "My history, my culture, my heritage is no less than yours. I do not need to change my culture and move into yours." In the caste system, dalits are considered the lowest. But how do dalits view it? What is their "reply"?'

Drawing on personal experience, oral materials, memories passed down through generations, as well as on church and missionary records, the narrative weaves in and out of the experiences of six generations of one family. The figure of the white dora in the excerpt translated here is based on John Clough, an American missionary who along with his wife, the distinguished scholar Emma Rauschenbush, worked among the madigas and malas in the Ongole region. During 1877–78, which was also a time of famine, Clough found work for them in the construction of the Buckingham Canal. These were also the years of the mass movements, in which 9,000 dalits from that area were converted to Christianity, suggesting that conversion cannot be adequately understood if viewed only through the lens of a personal change of faith. At a time when the missionary establishment was largely interested only in the upper castes, Clough and Rauschenbush rebelled to work with the untouchables and establish a Christianity that embraced that community's way of life and aspirations.

The excerpt from the opening pages of the novel, also translated here, gives us an insight into the narrative structure and philosophy of this novel. The storyline is held together by the narrator, Ruth, whose memory takes her back two generations and whose experience covers another three. But memory, we learn, is a fact of the present, not of the past. The tenses shift between present and past, holding on to this double time; myth blurs into history and history into myth. 'Is everything that we take to be history not a series of events that are endowed with mythic proportion in ways that obscure a dalit history?' the writer appears to be asking.

Though the storyline cuts back and forth across time, chronologically, the account begins with the terrible famines of the 1870s and '80s, in which many mala and madiga

neighbourhoods were wiped out. It is a story of degradation, migration, conversion to Christianity, battles with the upper castes both in society and within the Church. As we move down the generations, this story becomes one of involvement with revolutionary politics. B. Venkat Rao, a researcher, writes of it as a dalit history that 'traces a trajectory from untouchable to Christian, from Christian to communist, from communist to Naxalite and from Naxalites to dalits.' Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar, who translated *Antarani Vasantam* into English, suggest that the novel is an epic and point to the eighteen chapters that parallel the eighteen parvas of the Mahabharata.

Untouchable Spring: Excerpts

Translated by R. Akhileshwari

First, let me introduce Ruth to you. I will delve into the story later. Those who know Ruth as their favourite author might think I am being presumptuous in introducing someone they know so well. True, she has authored innumerable stories and poems and all of you are acquainted with her innermost feelings. But I am not going to introduce the author– poet Ruth or her work. I will introduce Ruth the woman, the woman I know.

Ruth sits by herself all the time. She has done so ever since Reuben died. She has been sitting all alone for many years now. As she sits by herself, she looks up at the sky. She sees just one star in the sky. All the other stars seem to have disappeared. As she lowers her gaze, she sees, on the high but cracked wall in front of her, the image of Jesus Christ crucified.

The past flashes in front of Ruth. She was a nurse in this beautiful region, a region where the sick and the diseased seemed to get well even without any medication. And her Reuben had been a pastor in the hospital where she worked. True, the present rather than the past matters. But Ruth believes that her Reuben is no memory of the past. He is very much alive in Ruth's memory. He is indeed her present. And will remain so.

Reuben came into her life silently and left just as quietly, leaving behind a trove of happy memories. So many memories that it seemed to her that life was an unending spring. A memory sprouted at every turn; a memory blossomed in every corner. It seemed as if the fallen blossoms—memories of Reuben—had carpeted the ground, her life! It seemed as if Reuben had strung the blossoms into garlands, and created poetry! These were the blossoms that had actually churned the depths of her being. They were not mere memories. They were a torrent. Now, how is one to control a torrent?

Reuben was a storyteller without parallel. He began one moonlit night. He went on for many nights. He would laugh as he told the stories. He would cry. At times, his eyes would cloud over. At other times, they would sparkle. She treasured that light in his eyes. The torment that clouded his eyes overflowed from hers. His stories were not mere memories. They did not bring mere tears to her eyes. They wrung her heart, chilled the spine and haunted her day and night.

He, like his ancestors, swam in dangerous, turbulent waters. Some of them were washed away. Others searched for shores tirelessly, like waves in the ocean. Her Reuben! What a man he was, her handsome untouchable! Yes, that's how she would address Reuben, again and again. Whenever she called him her handsome untouchable, he would simply stare at her like a child, his eyes filled with wonder.

She recalled the incident as if it was happening right then, in front of her eyes and not several decades ago. She went with him when he offered to show her the village of his ancestors. She walked. Those days she was his newly wedded bride. They walked together, just the two of them, for the first time. The night was awash with moonlight. They walked silently along the edge of the canal, a silence that was broken occasionally by the fish in the canal that jumped in the air and then splashed softly back into the water. The silent companionship of the walk was unique. Then he began to speak. To her ears, his words seemed like the music of the gushing stream, the wonder of the riotous colours of the spring, of an untouchable spring.

'We have more distance to cover. We have to walk all through this night. How are you feeling? Are you tired?' he asked her.

'No. This is a new experience for me, an unusual experience,' she responded.

'Shall I tell you a story?'

'Yes, do tell.'

As Reuben was about to speak, a bird, screeching raucously, flew past them at great speed. They followed the bird as far as the eye could see in that light. Its cry however could be heard for longer as it flew off into the night.

'That was the Bird of Moonlight. It is always like that … she shrieks as if the end of the world is at hand and rushes by as if somebody is in hot pursuit of her. And then all goes quiet. She is neither seen nor heard again,' said Reuben. If he were to say those words now, Ruth would not agree because she sees and hears it very clearly … in her mind. The association between the story that Reuben told her and the Bird of Moonlight is too strong for Ruth to forget.

Reuben began his story, the story that his grandfather had heard from *his* grandfather. It is about Siva and Parvati and their sacred cow called Kamadhenu. The unique thing about Kamadhenu was that, unlike other cows, it did not give mere milk. It gave,

instead, honeyed milk. Parvati would often treat the gods and goddesses to a feast of Kamadhenu's honeyed milk. Her only special guests at these feasts were the rishis, the holy men.

A youngster called Chennaiah would take care of this magical cow. One day, he felt like tasting the much-relished and unusual milk of Kamadhenu. He confessed his desire to Parvati. She refused him permission. But he persisted, begging again and again. Finally, Parvati told him to ask Kamadhenu herself. Chennaiah does and, wonder of wonders, on hearing of Chennaiah's desire, Kamadhenu collapses in a heap, dead.

The news of Kamadhenu's death reaches Siva and Parvati. It then spreads to the gods and goddesses. Siva and Parvati decide to cook the dead cow and feed the gods, goddesses and rishis. The invitees could not hold their excitement. They couldn't wait to taste the meat of the cow whose honeyed milk was so delicious. Their mouths watering, they crowded around the dead cow.

But a problem arose. Some among the gods said that, in accordance with tradition, the animal had to be moved from the place it had died before it could be cooked. They tried to move it, but the combined strength of the gods and goddesses was not sufficient to move it. The rishis then advised Siva to call Jambavanthudu the bear to move the animal since only he had the strength to do it. Siva ordered Chennaiah to shout out to Jambavanthudu to summon him.

Chennaiah raised a shout that was so loud that it echoed throughout the three worlds, heaven, earth and the netherworld.

Jambavanthudu appeared suddenly, but no one seemed to know from which world he came. He took in the situation at a glance and heard out the instructions of the gods. He lifted Kamadhenu effortlessly, with just his left hand. The amazed gods and goddesses clapped their hands and showered their blessings on him. They followed him in a procession as Jambavanthudu carried Kamadhenu effortlessly to the place chosen.

The gods skinned and carved up Kamadhenu. They then instructed Jambavanthudu to divide the meat into two portions and cook only one portion. They would, with the help of their power, bring Kamadhenu back to life by using the other portion. Then they left, excitedly discussing the dish that was being prepared and how much they looked forward to eating it.

But Jambavanthudu did not do as he was told. He cooked all the meat. As he was stirring the cauldron, a piece fell to the ground. Chennaiah cleaned the piece of meat that was covered with dirt from the ground and returned it to the boiling cauldron.

When Siva and Parvati came to know of what had happened, they grew extremely angry with Jambavanthudu for cooking all the meat instead of one portion as per their instructions. They were also extremely angry with Chennaiah for polluting the dish by

putting back the piece that had fallen on the ground. What do the gods and goddesses do at such times? They curse. Siva condemned Jambavanthudu and Chennaiah to a life in which they would sweep the streets for a livelihood and eat the meat of dead animals for their survival. All the gods and goddesses and rishis joined Siva and condemned Jambavanthudu and Chennaiah to a wretched life for eternity. The children of Jambavanthudu became madigas and those of Chennaiah became malas.

Having finished the story, Reuben looked at Ruth expectantly. She was silent. 'How was the story?' he asked with a short laugh. 'My grandfather told it very convincingly, just as his grandfather narrated the story of our birth—as though it were the truth. Where did we come from? What is our origin? It is in a curse. It is in the anger of god. It is in the piece of meat that fell to the ground accidentally. Why is it so? Why should it be so?' Reuben questioned his birth. But there seemed to be no anger in his voice. He actually asked these questions with a laugh. She did not respond. Instead, she wondered where the Moonlight Bird had gone and why it was not crying.

'Let me call out to her,' said Reuben, raising his head to the sky and crying out, imitating the bird's song. His cry was amazingly similar to the bird's. It was so loud that Ruth was sure that it had been heard far and wide, the cry echoing endlessly in the silent night.

At that time, Ruth did not make much of the story other than that it was a strange one. But today she feels that it was not just a strange story, but a despicably cruel story, so cruel that it was grotesque. She recalled that Reuben had laughingly asked her how the story was. But she realized now that there was no mirth in his laugh, only ridicule for—and rejection of—the ghastly, abominable story. She was filled with remorse for asking him thoughtlessly about the Moonlight Bird. At that time, she believed he was imitating the bird's cry. But today she feels it was no imitation. His cry was the cry of a spurned man; the agony of a man who was betrayed by his past. His cry was an expression of the anguish of an untouchable at the crimes committed on him and his people for generations, on generation after generation. His cry was a protest against the cruel story. His cry was a rejection of the story.

That is precisely why Ruth believes that her memories don't belong to the past. She believes they are a kind of spring, of life sprouting after being in thrall for aeons. They constitute the untouchables' spring. They are a turbulent ocean, where wave after wave rises to touch the sky and then crashes in fearsome crescendo. The spring lacerates one's soul. It scars one's conscience. It is the spring of the untouchables.

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Chinnodu doesn't like this stupid life. He spits on the ground again and again as he listens to Errodu. It was better to look at the spit than at Errodu's face. Suddenly Errodu's boasting and laughter stops. Everybody strains to see what had silenced him. Chinnodu looks up. Chinna Kapu [the landlord's son; lit. young kapu] had come into their part of the village. Everyone rose as was the practice when a kapu made his appearance. Chinnodu continued to sit. No one else dared do that. The others all stood up, lowered their heads and folded their hands together in subordination. An old woman struggled to rise from her cot, but failed. She, who already had a foot in the grave, struggled to get to her feet, crying out to her grandson, 'Help, help me get up. The kapu is here, help me!'

Dirty bloody life. Why should it be this way? Why should we stand when this chap shows up? Chinnodu refused to rise to his feet. Chinna Kapu was right in front of them. His feet were rough, his nose blunt and hooked like that of a vulture. He looks more like a wolf than human … like a buffalo … no, more like a bear, with a big, round paunch and a raucous voice. He is so ugly that even his wife won't look at him. She always has her eyes downcast in his presence. If she had an option, she wouldn't have stayed in their marriage; she wouldn't have borne him two baby bears. Like their father, they too molest the women labouring in the fields, cutting grass. But nobody has the courage to speak out against him. Dirty bloody life!

'Get up!'

'No way,' Chinnodu responds, if only to himself. There is no question of standing up in reverence. He reels from a kick that explodes on his head. Chinnodu lies sprawled on the ground. Kicks rain on him. The bear keeps up the attack, relentless. Despite the pain that sears through his being, Chinnodu doesn't scream. He feels his bones crack, but doesn't stand up. Hugging the earth, Chinnodu cries silently. No, the earth will open up only for Sita, not for you, Chinnodu. No one cares about Chinnodu's plight.

Chinna Kapu tires of kicking Chinnodu. He grabs Chinnodu's hands, twists them behind his back and holds them down. He then upturns the cot on the prone Chinnodu, drags a log, drops it on the cot, and storms away. Chinnodu is pinned to the ground. Nobody moves to help him. They simply stand and watch. No one removes the log, no one comes forward to unbind him. Nobody dares lift the cot. They simply stand and stare.

The news reaches the field where Chinnodu's wife and mother are working. Both come running, wailing aloud, and beating their breasts at the fate that had befallen Chinnodu. The people standing around Chinnodu stare at the two wailing women just as they had watched helplessly while Chinnodu was being thrashed. His mother and wife

rush towards him and, in a move that required real courage, lift the cot, untie the ropes and, with great effort, take Chinnodu home.

The afternoon passes—apparently without much difficulty for Chinnodu. For his mother, it is like she is dying; for Polamma his wife, it is as if she is being stabbed in the heart, repeatedly. But for Chinnodu, it is a silent revolt against what he abhors. Polamma watches Chinnodu quietly. This story is so familiar; it has not changed for decades and centuries. It is the same, every single day. It is a story that has an unremitting uncertainty, a story of the constant fear of what awaits them; of the humiliation, the violence and abuse they face daily.

Then, Chinnodu's life took a turn. At the edge of the village, a tent came up. Everybody talked about it with wonder. He too went to see for himself. Chinnodu's eyes popped out with astonishment when he saw the white dora riding in on a white horse. As he stared, the white dora saw him and signalled him to come closer. Chinnodu walked up hesitantly. The white dora took his hand in one of his own and placed another on his shoulder. Chinnodu had never experienced such excitement ever before. His heart raced; an inexplicable thrill filled his being. He was unable to understand what he was going through. Many years later, Chinnodu recalled this meeting: 'He beckoned me. I was afraid, but went. He put his arm round me! He took my hand! Until then, from the time I was born and had grown into a man, nobody other than a madiga or a mala had touched me. No brahmin had touched me. Neither any reddy. Nor any of the other caste people. Because I am untouchable. My body is such that if they touch me, their hands and their body will be defiled.'

But the dora had touched him. He doesn't belong to this village, or to this region, or even to this country. Yet he touched Chinnodu. Whom did he touch? An untouchable who was born in this village. Someone who, never in his entire life, had been touched. A white dora had touched him. He had declared, not by mere words, but by his touch, that his body was not untouchable. Chinnodu could not take his eyes off the white dora. His heart was racing. He looked at the white dora till his emotions overwhelmed him and flowed out of his eyes as tears. 'Those are the tears of Jeshus Chreest,' said the white dora. That was it. Chinnodu became a follower of Christ in his heart. Polamma accompanied him. His mother thought that was the best way, perhaps. She said to Polamma, 'My son cannot work now. He is not fit for work. Some demon has possessed his body. He is on the move always. Maybe that is for his good. You be with him, Pola,' she said to her.

A month later, the white dora baptized Chinnodu. His body dripping with water, Chinnodu asked the white dora with awe, 'Is this body of mine like the brahmin's body? The same as a reddy's body?' He asked in amazement, 'Can I now touch everything?

Can I now touch everybody?' He kept asking, unable to believe his body was no different.

The dora understood Telugu. He understood Chinnodu's anguish. He could feel the cuts inflicted on his heart bleeding. But he didn't express his own pain. 'For Christ, nobody is untouchable,' he said in a normal tone.

Chinnodu was not satisfied with the response. It was neither a straightforward nor a definite answer. He wanted to hear the answer. Again and again. That his body was not untouchable. That nobody is untouchable. But before he could voice his request, the white dora spoke. 'From now on, your name is Martin. Her name is Saramma.' The question he asked, the answer he wanted to hear, receded into the background.

Martin and Saramma joined the Nellore Mission Compound. It gave their life a new meaning. They learnt so much there. There was so much more to learn. They learnt to read. Martin became a preacher. Saramma became a Bible Woman. Their life turned a new page. On the one hand, they had the support of the missionaries; on the other, the respect and dignity of being a Christian. The uncertainty and fearful existence of the past faded into a distant memory.

They were on the move constantly, preaching God's word. They went from village to village, preaching and converting. Sometimes, when they were asked to, they stayed back in a village. At other times, they stayed in villages that they liked. It was all a new experience. Till the other day, they had lived a life that had no meaning. Now they could hold their heads high. But it was not so easy—to raise their heads. Martin had converted to Christianity to escape untouchability. But now, Christ had become untouchable! Should one laugh at the irony? Only Martin understood the tragedy. It was a tragedy without end. Every village was a new experience. But the experiences of the untouchable people were the same in every village.

In a village, whenever an animal dies, especially a cow or a buffalo, a madiga is called. If he is not available, a mala is called. He drags the carcass to the outskirts of the village. He doesn't bury it. Standing under the shade of a tree he carves it up. Madigas from the madiga locality and malas from the mala locality come rushing, carrying baskets in their hands. Each wants a generous serving. They scramble and shove each other to grab their share. Their shouts mingle with the sounds of the clashing bowls as they surge forward in eagerness. Overhead, vultures descend and await their turn. The village dogs too come running. They sit at a distance, their tongues hanging out, their mouths drooling saliva in anticipation of the feast. There is more shoving, more abuses hurled at each other. The vultures on the tree; the people under it and the dogs at a distance, all vie for a piece of the dead animal's flesh. What a sight! At long last, the work is done and gradually everybody goes home with their booty. The person who carved up the animal has kept aside a few juicy pieces of meat for himself. He

wraps them in the animal's skin, ties it to the stick on which he had dragged the carcass there, and leaves. In a flash, the vultures swoop down and the dogs make a dash for the remains, snarling and growling, chasing their rivals away.

Martin wanted to change this situation. He raised the issue at prayers. He said one shouldn't eat the flesh of a dead animal. Everybody looked at him in amazement as if he had mentioned an unthinkable thing. How is that possible, they wondered. We have been eating dead animals all our life. How is it possible to abandon the practice now? The very thought awed them. Martin brought up the issue again and again. At last, an elder in the audience raised his voice. We have a right over the carcasses, he said. Martin felt like laughing. The lands near the Krishna River are the right of the kammas; the lands near the Penna are the right of the reddys. And the right of the madigas is a carcass. He laughed out loud, mirthlessly. He kept laughing till people realized the unfairness of it all. Then the untouchable people agreed that they would never again eat a dead animal. The word reached the ears of the caste people. It was discussed in the evening meeting in the compound of the munsif where Chinna Choudary and Bucchi Choudary were present. When Chinna Choudary raised the matter, Bucchi Choudary nodded but did not act.

Not so Chinna Choudary. 'The madigas won't eat dead animals any more, I believe,' he said. 'Let them not. It does not matter to us whether they eat or not as long as they dispose of the carcass,' said Bucchi Choudary. Chinna Choudary responded: 'Today they say they will not eat the dead animal; tomorrow they will not remove the animal,' he said.

Bucchi Choudary was quick to see the point. 'Oh-ho, so that's how your train of thought is going,' he said. 'Yes, do as you wish.'

There is another aspect related to the issue of the dead animals. The madiga who takes away the carcass has to make footwear out of the animal's hide and give a pair to the Choudary, the price for eating the meat of the dead animal. If they don't eat the meat, then how will the choudarys get their footwear made? Bucchi Choudary agreed that something had to be done about it. He gave the go ahead to Chinna Choudary to deal with it. The occasion came not too long after.

Chinna Jalaiah's bull died. Before sending word to the madiga locality to take away the carcass, Jalaiah informed Chinna Choudary, who in turn told Bucchi Choudary. Soon the word spread to the madiga wada. Cinna[2] Venkadu and his son came to get the carcass. As they were dragging it away, Bucchi Choudary asked Cinna Venkadu to meet him once he was done with the work. Cinna Venkadu left the carcass under the tree. The vultures arrived and waited expectantly in the branches of the tree. The dogs took their place at a distance. But today there are no people clamouring for the meat of the dead animal. Cinna Venkadu removed the hide, dug a pit and buried the carcass.

News of Cinna Venkadu's act soon found its way to the choudarys. That he had buried the carcass, but taken away the skin. Also that the madigas did not fight among themselves for a piece of the dead animal's flesh as usual.

'Now what?' Chinna Jalamma's son-in-law asked Pedda Jalamma's son-in-law.

'The village is being turned into a cemetery,' was the response.

That day, the attendance at the Chinna Choudary's daily panchayat meeting was larger than usual. Cinna Venkadu hung the hide from a hook in his hut and went to see Bucchi Choudary. He was not at home. Venkadu was told he was in Chinna Choudary's house, and so went looking for the choudary there. He saw several choudarys gathered in the compound. He stood at a distance waiting expectantly.

Returning only at night, Bucchi Choudary said, 'I have some work for you.'

Cinna Venkadu turned to go.

Chinna Jalaiah pretended to have seen Venkadu just then. 'Wait for a second,' he ordered.

Venkadu waited.

'When will you give me the slippers?' he asked, assuming a normal tone.

Everybody was trying to pretend nothing unusual had taken place. But their jaws dropped at Venkadu's response. He hadn't consumed the meat, he said. For a madiga to assert himself thus was no small thing.

'Therefore you don't have to make slippers,' stated Bucchi Choudary, completing the unstated part of Cinna Venkadu's response. Choudary's tone was soft, as it always was. He never raised his voice, whatever the provocation. He has a habit of swaying back and forth while speaking. He appeared to draw that conclusion very casually. Choudary is like a man who, seemingly casually, sets on fire the thatched roof of a house even as he sits right under it. He did just that now, setting off a spark. He lit a cigarette. 'You have changed your religion, right? Christians don't eat the meat of dead animals, right? Isn't Martin your leader? He told you not to eat the meat, right?' he stated, blowing the cigarette smoke. He let off a string of abuses aimed at the cigarette.

The flames suddenly shot up high, very high: 'Eat the buried meat, you bastard,' screamed Chinna Choudary, shaking with uncontrolled fury.

Cinna Venkadu looked Chinna Choudary directly in the eye without saying a word. That one look said so much that an infuriated Chinna Choudary grabbed a stick and began to beat Cinna Venkadu like he would thrash an animal.

Blows rained on Cinna Venkadu. Everybody joined the kicking. Then they dragged him to the place where he had buried the carcass. They made him dig out the remains and told him that he should cook and eat it. If he did not, then they would bury him in

that very pit. Having delivered the threat, they returned to their homes, bloated with pride as if they had saved a great tradition from being destroyed.

Martin cannot forget the sight of Cinna Venkadu walking into the village, dragging the putrefying, muddied carcass. He is still haunted by the helplessness and hopelessness that was writ large on Venkadu's face. No, this is not a small matter. To move around holding up one's head is not a small matter. Neither is the assertion of a choice to eat or not eat a dead animal.

It set Martin thinking about his own life, first as Chinnodu who had grown up as Sivaiah, and the turn his life took when he became Martin. It was as if life was struggling to force itself through a narrow space between two huge boulders. The boulders were blood-splattered, streams of blood drying into streaks on the rock. Just as they are, crushed between boulders and almost smothered by them. They struggle to live, to find the strength to stay alive, their blood vessels bursting at the effort, spilling blood everywhere. They are hunted—not by any four-legged creature, but by the two-legged ones. These two legs are religion and caste. Incident after incident, experience after experience crowd Martin's memory. All of them rooted in the same cause: the desire to hold up one's head.

A cock crowed in the distance, bringing Martin back to the present. It was already getting to be dawn. He glanced at Saramma; she too hadn't slept well. She noticed his restlessness.

'You didn't sleep?' she asked.

'No', admitted Martin.

'Sivaiah is Yellanna's son,' she said, bringing up the topic.

'Yes, Sashirekha told me that,' he said.

Both his parents, Yellanna and Subhadra, had been buried. Yellanna was a great singer. Martin had heard about him, but had not heard his singing or seen him.

'When I was in Nellore I heard his name constantly,' he said.

There was a long pause.

Finally, Saramma spoke up. 'Let them stay with us, both Sivanna and Sashirekha. I want them to live with us. Jesus is Merciful,' Saramma said, pleading.

The darkness passed. The morning lit up. Martin asked Sivaiah to go with him. Sivaiah did not inquire where or why. He just went. Sashirekha stayed back with Saramma.

While Sivaiah accompanies Martin on his travel into villages, preaching and converting, Sashirekha works as a labourer in the fields. She is beginning to learn the alphabet along with several others who had migrated to the village for work. When the

work was over, some of them decided to return to their villages, but most decided to stay back. Just as Sivaiah did. He was going to stay with Martin and Saramma. The return to his village, Yennela Dinne, can wait. He can and he will go back there one day before he dies. For now, his calling is with Martin, in this place. He feels an attachment to it, its sand dunes that stretch as far as the eye can see, its small ponds of water everywhere and its green fields. He could hear the sea wherever he went. For some reason, he liked the place.

Saramma too had a special bond with the village. Martin and she had travelled from village to village their entire lives, and had never had a home in the real sense. She felt that this was where they could spend their last days. Saramma had developed a deep bond with the children of the labourers, but her bond with Sashirekha was special. It was as if Sashirekha had come looking for her; indeed, she believed Christ had sent Sashirekha to her. Saramma and Martin had no children. For Saramma, Sashirekha felt like her daughter. 'If this daughter of mine has a child, I will take it to my bosom and forget everything else,' she thought. She wanted nothing more from life.

Their settlement had come up when migrant families had set up home there. There were only thirty families, and all from two castes: mala and madiga. There was no other village around for sixty miles.

Sivaiah keenly watches Martin at work: he notes how he behaves, how he preaches, what topics and issues he discusses, which questions he goes into in detail and which ones he skirts. He takes it all in. Most of all, Sivaiah likes Martin's passion, his anger and his way of speaking directly, without mincing words. Sivaiah wants to be able to speak like Martin. He wants to cultivate Martin's intensity, his anger and emotion. He is trying to read the Bible, although it is a difficult task. Martin tells him to keep at it, and makes him read it again and again. The funny thing is that Sivaiah is not properly literate. But he has a good ear and can recite several passages from the Bible easily. Martin claims that Christ works miracles. One day, Martin asked Sivaiah if he would work for Christ. 'Do you like the fact that Christ wants to use you for Himself?' he asked. Sivaiah did not answer. Sivaiah became Simon. Pilatus had passed the judgment at the trial of Jesus Christ that he should be crucified. He was handed over to the Romans to be crucified. As they were taking him for crucifixion, they forced Simon, a poor Cyrenian who was passing by, to carry the Cross along with Jesus. That's who you are Sivaiah, said Martin.

In reality, even if Sivaiah cannot become a Simon, he was destined to carry the Cross. He was born to carry it. As were his people. To them, carrying the Cross or being crucified on it was nothing new. Every day, every minute, in every corner of this country, they are crucified. There are countless Simons and Martins in this land. There

is no scarcity of Christs either who die on the Cross, paying for the sins committed by others.

Martin carries the Cross and Simon helps him carry it. Together, they spread the word of a Cross-bearing Christ.

Let us look at history from the right perspective. Those who converted to Christianity were not only mala and madiga. Even brahmins converted. So did reddys and choudarys. The Martins and Sivaiahs took to Christianity to overcome their untouchability, to get rid of their hunger. Most importantly, they did so to escape being hunted down by fellow humans; they did it as a self-preservation tactic. Whether Chinnodu became Martin, or Sivaiah was transformed into Simon, the reason was the same: to shed their untouchable status. Simon was amazed to see the upper castes, the reddys, the sastrys and the choudarys at the Suvartha meeting. They had transformed themselves into John Paul Reddy, Emmanuel Sastry and Joshua Choudary. Simon was surprised to see the son-in-law of the karanam of Yennela Dinne at the meeting. He was speechless when he learnt that Sastry was none other than the karanam's son-in-law. The karanam's daughter too was at the meeting. Their sons were carrying copies of the Bible. Silver crosses adorned their necks. They were still students.

Simon bent over to whisper in Martin's ear: 'See, there's the karanam's son-in-law. He has converted in his old age.' Martin pointed to another person. 'Look, that's John Paul Reddy.' Simon followed Martin's eyes. John Paul Reddy was clean-shaven. He was so overweight that he looked like a baby elephant. 'Standing next to him is Joshua Choudary of Krishna district. Cotton Master had converted him. Since then, Choudary's fields are yielding gold,' said Martin. Simon couldn't take his eyes off Choudary. His head was wrapped in the traditional turban. His upper lip sported a thick, proud growth. He carried a gold-crested cane and wore a colourful coat. Simon was plagued by all kinds of thoughts even after they returned home. He was overcome with a sense of fear. In and around his village, the reddys, the brahmins and the choudarys had not taken to Christianity as they had here. But then there was a distinct possibility of that happening. If not today then tomorrow, a reddy could become a Christian. So could a kamma. And a sastry. Should that eventually happen, then what? Simon tossed about, unable to sleep. He examined his body closely. He stroked his stomach. He did it again and again, not knowing why he did it.

Martin was speaking. 'Master Clough did not agree to this. Nor did his wife. They converted only malas and madigas and became part of their lives. Mrs Clough insisted that Christianity was meant to save the untouchables. Clough supported her. We cannot close the doors of the Church to the untouchables for the sake of the upper castes, he would say. But not everybody among the white doras were like Clough or Cotton,' concluded Martin.

Simon listened to Martin attentively.

'I have walked through these fields many times; hundreds and thousands of times. I don't know how long I can walk like this, but as long as I am alive, my path will always lead to the mala habitation, to the madiga habitation,' said Martin.

Simon did not respond. There was no need to. He kept listening.

'The son-in-law of Yennala Dinne karanam is a well-known lawyer. He is the one who looks into all land-related problems. He needs the support of the white doras and so he converted to Christianity. He spends most of his day hovering around them,' said Martin.

Simon is unable to imagine the Crucified and the crucifiers under the same roof. But Jesus Christ, being all-knowing and kind-hearted, certainly would know how to keep the two separate. This reassuring thought brought comfort to the tormented Simon. After many days, he slept peacefully that night. Human beings are so predictable. They may be haunted by the dilemmas facing them. They get agitated. And then they hit upon what they think is a solution and quieten down, believing that to be the end of their problems.

Time passes, but the doubts and hopes that arise in him refuse to subside. Sashirekha is with child. There's a burst of celebration. Not so much Simon, but Saramma. Sashirekha too is at ease now. Her inability to conceive despite several years of marriage used to haunt her, although she never voiced her feelings. Now she is happy. Saramma had noticed that Sashirekha would quickly turn to the task of cleaning the rice or millet. Her suspicions were aroused. She saw that Sashirekha was slyly popping the small lumps of earth that had got into the grain into her mouth. Saramma's suspicions were confirmed. Her joy knew no bounds. Sashirekha was with child. Saramma shared this news first with Martin. Martin was exultant. You are now a grandmother, he shouted. Saramma too felt the same. Sashirekha was indeed like her own daughter. Her love and affection for Sashirekha was such that she almost forgot Subhadra. Will it be a girl or boy, wondered Saramma. That doesn't matter, she told herself, as long as there was a baby in the house. She began to count the days before the baby would arrive. Then it arrived and Martin had never seen Saramma so happy. 'This baby is Saramma's, not yours. He was born only for her,' he told Sashirekha. Sashirekha could not deny it. She only breastfed her baby. The rest of the caring was done by Saramma. Whether the baby needed a bath or to be rocked to sleep, he was always in Saramma's lap. At night, he slept with her in her bed.

'The baby's toes are just like his grandfather Yellanna's,' Simon would say, patting the toes. 'His fingers too are long and thin like his grandpa's.' Sashirekha would not agree: 'He looks like Subhadra, my mother-in-law,' she would insist. In fact, she thought everything about the baby resembled Subhadra. It was precisely for this reason that Saramma loved Sashirekha so dearly. While other women would see their mother's

features in their newborn, Sashirekha saw her mother-in-law's features. She was an unusual daughter-in-law. Her mother-in-law was no less unusual. How many mothers-in-law manage to make a place for themselves in the hearts of their daughters-in-law?

Simon began to play with the baby again. 'This finger is like Yellanna's finger. This too is like his. This nose, the eyes … '

'He is the spitting image of my mother-in-law,' interrupted Sashirekha defiantly. Now the conquest of Saramma's heart was complete. Even as the baby lay there on her outstretched legs, Saramma prayed that as long as she lived, she would never have to be separated from these two people.

As time flew, it brought changes in its wake. A movement for Christianity seemed to have begun. Malas and madigas had begun converting to Christianity in large numbers. There were instances of a thousand people being baptized on a single day. On the other hand, violence was let loose on Christians. No, not on all Christians, but on the mala and madiga Christians of Krishna district. There were no reports of attacks on the reddy Christians of Nellore district. There were no instances of attacks on brahmin Christians who had established their hold in government offices. The attacks were against only mala and madiga Christians, the untouchable Christians.

Each village had its story to tell. In Markapuram, sixteen mala and madiga Christians were confined in a jail and tortured. They were asked to sing the bhajans of Krishna and not hymns to Christ. They refused and sang only the songs of Christ. In Kanigiri, a madiga Christian was stripped of his clothes in public and paraded. The Bible he carried was torched. In Bandlamudi, the Christians were attacked in their homes in the middle of the night. In Kuchipudi, the village munsif summoned ten Christians who had taken a dip in the village tank and converted to Christianity. He ordered them to take a bath in the same tank to wash off the stain of Christianity. When they refused, they were dragged to the tank and thrown in. Then, right there, they sacrificed a bull and a goat to Goddess Poleramma. They then forced the Christians to prostrate before the Goddess and went on to smear the blood of the slain bull on their faces. They then danced and forced the Christians to join them. In the vicinity of Cheemakurthi village, a Christian youngster was chased and caught. He had committed two crimes: one, he was carrying the Bible in his hand, and two, he had entered the upper-caste village, where the untouchables were not allowed entry. Even if they had to enter for some reason, they were required to take off their footwear and walk barefoot through the upper-caste neighbourhood. There were other conditions too imposed on them. They were not to cover their heads with the traditional cloth. They were not to carry an umbrella. They were to keep their heads bent and eyes downcast. They were not to even look sideways. And should one come across an upper-caste woman and even glance at her, it would mean the end of that man. That's why in some villages, untouchables made a guttural

sound as they passed through the upper-caste neighbourhood—as notice to upper-caste women of their presence. When the women heard the sound, they would remain indoors, avoiding contact with the untouchables. The sound they made was to be loud enough to be heard across several streets. And should an upper-caste woman not hear the sound, because she was engrossed in her work, or perhaps because she was in the garden some distance from the street, and come out and encounter a mala or madiga, it would be not her fault but that of the untouchable.

Such were the shackles that bound the untouchables. The youngster in Cheemakurthi had transgressed twice over. He was carrying a Bible in his hand. To add to that, he was wearing slippers. He had violated the established norms that governed the untouchables. That was it. He was dragged through the street. He was stabbed all over with sharp instruments. He was dragged to the outskirts of the village. They tied his battered body to a tree on the edge of a forest clump on a road used mostly by malas and madigas. The news of this killing spread like forest fire, from village to village, leaving the malas and madigas shaking in fear. They could not tell when or from where the next attack would come. Nobody, no mala or madiga was spared. Nothing of theirs was spared. Some of them had begun to wear clean clothes. The clean clothes were dirtied. They had refused to work on a Sunday. Their holiday was desecrated. They had refused to eat the meat of dead animals. This decision of theirs was attacked. Their children had begun to get some education in missionary schools. The schools were attacked. Some of the malas and madigas had learnt to hold their heads up. Their heads were attacked.

When they claimed their hands as their own, their hands were hit.

When they claimed their legs as their own, their legs were hit.

When they claimed their eyes as their own, their eyes were hit.

When they claimed their fingers as their own, their fingers were hit.

None were spared. Malas were attacked. Madigas were attacked. The Christ of the malas was attacked, as was the Christ of the madigas. It was enough that Christ belonged to the untouchables—He was attacked. In the face of such atrocities, Martin could not remain silent. He spoke up against the attacks. ‘We did not take to Christianity to remain silent. We did not accept the Holy Word to shrivel up with fear inside,’ he would say. Martin’s voice had gone hoarse from addressing prayer meetings day in and day out to give courage to the victims. He went to every village where an attack had taken place. He met officials and urged them to give protection to the victims. In Simon’s eyes, Martin’s stature grew by the day. He himself became Martin’s shadow, following him, running after him, going wherever the old man went, tirelessly.

‘Let me tell you all clearly: I am quoting my Jehovah’s words. The words that Christ spoke to his people at Nazareth on the Sabbath day,’ began Martin. ‘I am here as Christ’s chosen one to spread the Holy Word among the poor. Christ has given me the responsibility to release those who have been imprisoned for years. I have been sent by Christ Himself to uplift the crushed people. Else, why will I be here? Why else would I have become so close to Christ?’

For Simon, these were not mere words. They were the very embodiment of Truth. Martin took aim at the karanams, the reddys and the sastrys. They were the culprits. Their hands had been sullied with the blood of innocent people. ‘Their fingers have been sullied, as well as their tongues that speak lies and their lips that spout wickedness. They have no principles, they do not adhere to truth. They conceive evil and give birth to sin.’ His words seemed to have been spoken by Jesus Christ, no less, as if he was delivering the Sermon on the Mount.

Martin was unstoppable. ‘See, when I got baptized, I proclaimed that this body of mine was not untouchable. If that proclamation is rendered meaningless, this very body is of no use to me. I swear upon Christ! If holding up my head is a crime, I will commit that crime. If I have to pay for that crime with my head, I will pay unhesitatingly. Jesus Christ turned his body into bread and his blood into wine to uphold Truth. We consumed them for the sake of Truth.’

Martin’s words are razor-sharp, like a sickle that cuts off the grain-bearing stalk from the plant with a single stroke. Simon drinks in Martin’s words. His emotions run high; the words turn the blood in his veins into a torrent that threatens to burst them.

‘Here, look at our Father standing in front of you. He’s wearing a violet robe. On his head is the Crown of Thorns. He’s arraigned in front of Pilate. Around him the hysterical priests are screaming for his blood. They are screaming that my Father be crucified.’

As the words spill out, there’s a movement in the audience. A series of images seem to have flashed in front of the people. Of Christ dragging the Cross. Of Christ crucified on the Cross. Of a blood-soaked Christ. Martin presses forward relentlessly. ‘We are not cowards. We will not run away. We will carry on bravely. Christ is Merciful. May the blood of Lord Jesus be victorious! May evil be destroyed!’ Simon would join in full-throated, defiantly seeking destruction of their enemies. The prayer hall reverberated with calls for Christ’s victory and an end to the evil.

Thus, against the background of continuing violence against malas and madigas, a new problem raised its head. Martin’s village of Valasapadu consisted of only Christians. It was boycotted by a neighbouring village that was barely half a mile away. That village had only five mala and madiga families. They were warned by the upper-caste villagers not to mix with the Valasapadu people, so they would not turn bad too.

The Valasapadu Christians faced problems on two fronts: one, they had no livelihood because they were being boycotted; two, there was violence against Christians everywhere around them. They did manage to find work, but for that they had to walk long distances. Or they had to return to their own villages, which they had left in the first place in search of work. It was then that they thought of the barren land, measuring about twenty-five acres in all, some distance from the village, abutting the canal. The Christians of Valasapadu approached the revenue authorities, asking that the land be allotted to them. The officials assured them that it would be done and asked them to come back after ten days. When they went back after ten days, the officials told them that, according to their land records, the land in question was not wasteland and hence it could not be given to the poor. Frustrated, the villagers met the white dora. He summoned the karanam, who came accompanied by the munsif. The karanam clarified that the land belonged to two men and that if they could be convinced to part with it, they would have no objection in handing it over to the Christian people. Martin maintained that the land was barren and that it should be given to them. The white dora was convinced. Soon rumours were spread that Christians were grabbing the land of upper-caste farmers. The upper castes were outraged. They filed a suit in a court of law. They hired a lawyer—the son-in-law of the karanam of Yennela Dinne, Emmanuel Sastry.

Martin met him. ‘There are two issues here: one, the land belongs to no one; two, you are a Christian and you should support the Christians’ claim for the land,’ he said.

Sastry looked at Martin gravely. ‘Those two farmers too are Christians,’ he said.

Martin was taken aback. When did they convert? Who baptized them? It was all a puzzle.

‘They took to Christianity before the case came to me. They were baptized in Nellore,’ replied Sastry.

Martin was not convinced.

Sastry explained, ‘I too am a Christian. I could not refuse the case when a fellow Christian approached me,’ he said.

Martin protested. ‘But these are poor Christians. They are malas and madigas.’

‘But a Christian is a Christian whether he is a reddy or a kamma, a brahmin or a mala or madiga,’ said Sastry. ‘All are Christians, even you have to agree.’

The truth dawned on Martin. He started on the return journey. Sastry’s words that a Christian was devoid of caste echoed in his ears. That was an intelligent argument, but it was also clearly deceptive. In fact, they used their intelligence only to cheat and to accumulate wealth.

Martin hurried back to unburden himself to Simon. Simon too believed Sastry was in the know of the elaborate deception that had been set up. They met the white dora and told him the whole story. They made a strong argument that the land should be given to them. Martin pursued the case. He met the white dora several times. Once he met him alone; another time he took Simon along. Then he mobilized all the thirty families, along with their children and sat in protest at the white dora's bungalow. The news spread far and wide. It became the topic of discussion among upper castes everywhere. At long last, Martin's efforts succeeded. It was proved that the land was indeed village common land. And it was allotted to the poor Christians to cultivate. This was no mean achievement. It was not something that the upper castes would look upon kindly. They regarded it as a defeat—not something they could reconcile themselves to. The choudarys and the reddys, traditionally rivals, came together, unified against the malas and madigas.

The untouchable Christians decided to celebrate Christmas in a grand manner. It would also be a fitting way to celebrate their victory in the matter of the land. They planned to pitch tents in their land, hold prayers and prepare a feast. Every family contributed food grains for the feast as their share. Martin appointed two young men to be in charge of the arrangements. Saramma was overseeing the women's activities. Everybody got busy with their allotted work. Some pounded the paddy to separate the rice. Others pounded the chillies. The sounds of festivity filled the air.

Saramma was engulfed with a deep sense of fulfilment as she watched the women at work. Her grandchild alternately played in her lap or sat beside her, contentedly watching the activity around him. As the women pounded away, Sashirekha sang Yellanna's songs to keep the pace up and stop exhaustion from creeping in. Saramma hugged the child again and again. 'Those are your grandfather's words,' she whispered in the child's ears. Gurgling with joy at the activity around him, the baby took off from her lap with small, uncertain steps to investigate the activity that caught his fancy. As he returned to the comfort of Saramma's lap after whetting his curiosity, Subbaratnam addressed Saramma: 'How many mortars will boom at your grandson's wedding?' she asked, meaning 'how grand an affair will it be?' Saramma was shaken a little. I want to live till then, she thought. I should be alive to see his wedding, she prayed.

Martin, accompanied by Simon, went preaching to every village. They wanted to cover all the villages in the neighbourhood by 24 December so that they could be home for Christmas. By the time they had covered the last village on their itinerary, night had fallen. Their home was a good three hours away. There were more villages on the way, but they would have to wait. The two men headed homeward.

'Simon, did you notice that after the prayers, our people asked for a piece of land for themselves?'

‘Yes, it is a need too, to own a piece of land,’ responded Simon. ‘We need land to hold our heads up.’

‘Yes. When we resolve one issue, another one crops up. We believed that it would be enough if we could remove the stigma of our bodies being untouchable. But it is important that we have an independent means to feed the bodies. We need both. The reddy has them both. So does the choudary,’ said Martin.

Simon brought up another topic. ‘You know a major incident took place in Yennela Dinne?’

Martin had heard about it. And also that Narasiah, Mataiah and Naganna were involved in it.

‘They made up a song about the brahmins,’ said Simon.

‘Yes, I even heard the song … ’

Oh you son-in-law of Yennela Dinne,

oh Emmanuel Sastry,

you have given up your religion but not your caste;

You are a Christian now

but you have not dropped the tail [called] Sastry!

Oh John Paul Reddy,

oh Joshua Choudary,

you have let go of religion but not caste!

Martin sang the words of the song.

Dogs barked at a distance in the dark night. Simon looked around and grabbed a fallen twig to keep them at bay should they get aggressive. ‘Let’s hurry, we have to reach home before Christ is born,’ he said.

The barking of the dogs seemed closer. ‘We have to give a name to the baby tomorrow. Have you thought of a name?’ asked Martin.

Simon hadn’t. ‘You decide,’ he said.

‘Let’s ask Saramma. How about this name?’ said Martin.

He was about to say the name he had in mind for the baby, but stopped short. A mob had materialized in front of them. The dogs’ barking turned into frenzy. The men, armed with knives and daggers, fell on Martin. They stabbed him. Repeatedly. In the stomach. In the chest. In the gut. In the back. Martin collapsed. Before he could even realize what was happening, the mob turned on Simon. They thrashed him till he bled from a dozen

wounds. They kept at it without a break. Simon prayed that he would just die. The beatings were unbearable. He was almost plastered to the ground with the blood that was flowing from his wounds.

Somebody pulled Simon to his feet. He fell, unable to support himself. More beatings, accompanied by abuse and commands to stand up. He felt his legs giving way, but the threat of more thrashing prevented him from collapsing. They asked him to lift Martin who was lying in a pool of blood. He tried to lift him, but could not. Blows rained on him till he managed to lift Martin. They ordered him to carry him on his shoulders. He tried. He failed. More blows. More shouts that he carry Martin. He tried again. Failed again. They hit him. Again and again. He was unable to even walk a few steps. At every step they hit him. Simon walked with great effort. Walked with Martin on his shoulders. Even as he was wracked with pain, Simon remembered the words of Martin. 'You will be called Simon, the Simon who carried the Cross.' That Simon carried the Cross of Jesus Christ. This Simon was carrying the body of Christ's follower.

Simon summoned whatever strength he possessed. He should reach his village before daybreak. He walked slowly; every step was an effort; every step was a torture. But slowly, Simon found the strength. His faltering steps became steadier. Gradually, he gained speed.

Simon's shoulders were drenched with Martin's blood.

Blood that should not have flowed in vain.

Blood that should have flowed as sweat for longer and wet the soil.

Blood that hungered for justice.

Blood that had flowed for the sake of Truth.

Blood that had been drawn to persecute the Righteous.

Blood that had garnered love, kindness and generosity.

Blood that had spilled on the Cross and flowed like a rivulet.

Blood of the untouchable.

Chilukoori Devaputra

‘My father was a voracious reader of Telugu literature. He read both stories and novels. I would regularly borrow books from the library in Nandikotkuru for him. That is how I started going to the library. When we shifted to Nandyala, my English teacher was a detective fiction writer called Adavani Eshwar. I never read his novels, but knowing him taught me that writers are ordinary people and anyone can become a writer,’ Chilukoori Devaputra recollects. Born in 1952 in the village Kaluvapalle in Anantapur district to Asheervadam and Sarojanamma, Devaputra was one of seven children. His father was a surveyor and worked in several small towns in the Rayalaseema area. So Devaputra also moved schools between Dhone, Aluru, Nandikotkuru and Nandyala in Rayalaseema before joining the Government Multipurpose High School in Anantapur town, from which he completed his twelfth form. In 1971, Devaputra joined the Government Arts College in Anantapur, and opted for science subjects, because seats were only available in the Zoology, Physics and Chemistry streams. He found the science lectures difficult to follow and instead spent his time at the Central Library in town, reading Telugu literature. Devaputra failed his examination and did not complete his college studies.

He married Lakshmi Devi in 1974. He was unemployed at that time, and from 1974 to 1982, his father supported the couple. In 1983, Devaputra got a job as a warder in the Jail Department. He moved to the Revenue Department in 1984 when he was selected for the post of village assistant through the Andhra Pradesh Public Service Commission. Devaputra was later promoted to senior assistant. He also worked as revenue officer between 1989 and 1990. He retired as deputy tehsildar in 2009, and now lives in Anantapur.

Though Devaputra attributes his initial interest in literature and rationalist ideas to his father, it was in high school that he was introduced to the ideas of progressive Telugu writers like Sri Sri and Chalam, as well as the writings of social reformer Periyar Ramaswamy. The well-known scholar Miriyala Ramakrishna and D. Srinivasarao were his Telugu teachers. They were friendly, jovial and critical of obsolete or superstitious ideas. Though Devaputra may have been too young to fully absorb these ideas at the time, they made him a fan of Sri Sri and Chalam later. While Devaputra was in the college, he happened to read a book on the techniques of short-story writing, *Oka Katha: Anekarakalu* (On Story: Several Types) by Polavarapu

Srihari Rao. Persuaded that story writing was easy, he attempted a love story in 1973. He wrote six stories in rapid succession and sent one to *Andhra Jyothi*. It wasn't published. He stopped writing stories for a while.

He started writing again in 1977 in response to the Telugu writer Ranganayakamma's advertisement inviting new writers to contribute to a new literary journal, *Praja Sahiti*. Devaputra, who considered Ranganayakamma next only to Chalam, decided to write about an incident he had witnessed in his grandmother's village, Kaluvapalle, which he used to visit during summer holidays. One day, he saw a dalit woman in labour near the well. There was no one with her. An old dalit woman, a stranger, who had come to visit her relatives in the village, helped that woman deliver the baby. Later Devaputra learnt that the dalit woman had been charged with an illicit relationship and was the victim of a social boycott by the dalits in the village. The story 'Manavatvam', based on this incident, was accepted and published in 1977. 'The literary people and writers in Anantapur (Singamaneni Narayana, among others) really helped me develop the art of story writing,' Devaputra says.

Buoyed by this success, he began to write regularly for *Praja Sahiti*. Many stories were returned, but they always came with Ranganayakamma's critical but very useful comments. This further strengthened Devaputra's resolve to write. In 1978, he became a member of Jana Sahiti, a literary organization of Marxist–Leninist orientation, formed by Ranganayakamma and others.

In 1979, he published another story, 'Samidhalu'. It deals with how, in the context of the factional feuds in Rayalaseema, dalits go to jail, while the upper castes unite and escape punishment for their part in the fight. Devaputra considers this his first 'dalit' story. 'My earlier story, "Manavatvam", was about a dalit woman, but it was not written from a dalit point of view,' Devaputra observes.

As a warder, Devaputra was shocked by the life and conditions in prisons. He wrote the story 'Aaru Glasulu' (Six Glasses), the first of a series of stories, and his first novel, *Cheekati Poolu* (Flowers of Darkness, 2003), on the life of child prisoners and corruption in the police and judiciary.

The Telugu novelist Kesava Reddy had once observed in a personal letter that there was a spark of the novelist in Devaputra. It was only after reading Kesava Reddy's novels, Devaputra says, that he wrote his second novel, *Addamlo Chandamama* (Moon in the Mirror, 1989). The work was acclaimed as the first dalit novel in Telugu. This novel and the next one, *Panchamam* (The Fifth Order), tell the story of how dalits lose lands that have been legally allotted to them. *Panchamam* won the third prize in the 1998 American Telugu Association competition and has been critically acclaimed. His fourth novel, *Kakshasila* (The Land of Revenge, 1998; the original title is a pun on the Buddhist centre, Takshasila) published in *Chatura*, a monthly magazine of the Eenadu

group. Five collections of short stories have appeared: *Aaru Glasulu* (Six Glasses, 1988), *Yekaki Nouka Chappadu* (The Sound of a Lone Ship, 1995), *Vankara Tinkara* (Zigzag, 2005), *Bandee* (Prisoner, 2006) and *Chivari Manushulu* (The Last Human Beings, 2010). He has received many awards, including the Nutalapati Literary Award (1990), the Telugu University Dharmanidhi Award (2000), Vishalandhra Golden Jubilee Literary Award (2002) and the Official Language Association Award (2003).

An excerpt from the novel *Panchamam* is translated here. Devaputra told us that he began writing this novel based on his experiences as a revenue inspector. 'As a revenue inspector, I know how lands are distributed according to the Land Ceiling Act and later taken back by the landlords who manipulate the law. In one such case, I myself went to a village to announce the "reconvey" orders stating that the landlord would take back the lands distributed in this village and surrender his land in another mandal. When I asked the village servant who accompanied me to make a public announcement, he broke down, learning that the land he had been allotted would be taken away. This and similar incidents were put together as *Panchamam*,' Devaputra says. The novel documents a strand of the history of the contemporary dalit movement—the struggles against untouchability and atrocities, campaigns against capital punishment, mala– madiga differences, dalit and Marxist debates and so on.

The Fifth Order: Excerpts

Translated by N. Venugopal

It was almost noon …

Though it was not summer yet, the heat was beginning to get severe. Huge mountain-like clouds moved across the sky.

'Terrible … terrible … it's so sultry, Maamaa,[1] it may rain tonight,' said Anjaneyulu Naidu to Sitaramappa.

They were sitting in the portico of the house, looking at the day's newspaper. On a veranda close by, labourers chatted as they husked groundnuts.

It was fairly quiet on the street. One or two people passed by on their way to the shop to buy betel leaves or beedis.

'Yes, yes, it may rain,' Sitaramappa agreed.

‘Naidu, this Purushotham fellow doesn’t stick on anywhere … it’s a relief that he has got that job. Otherwise he would have been an everyday nuisance for us.’

Immersed in the newspaper, Naidu did not get the drift of what Sitaramappa was saying.

Raising his head, he asked, ‘What nuisance?’

‘Why do you ask me? I am talking about the news in the District Supplement.’

‘Oh, that … I did read that, Maamaa!’

‘When police locked up the mala and madiga bastards, this Purushotham fellow questions the police in the name of some rights protection forum. If he had become a headache to the police there, how would we have tackled him here? Didn’t we thrash that mala Nagigadu[2] yesterday for riding a bicycle in front of us! If Purushotham had been here, he would have pounced on us!’

‘Maamaa, you are happy that he is not here. But another bastard, much more dangerous than him, is coming up, you know …’

‘Who, Suresh? Fuck his sister and wife! Should we take that mala bastard into account? If he crosses his limits, we will kick him in the butt and shut him up,’ said Sitaramappa, lighting his cigarette and returning to his newspaper.

‘Maamaa! maamaa! Look there,’ said Naidu pointing towards the street.

Sitaramappa, cigarette still between his lips, raised his head in style and was dumbstruck.

The scene before their eyes: two mala boys riding a bicycle on the street.

‘Hey, call those bastards here, Naidu, call them,’ ordered Sitaramappa.

Even as Naidu was shouting, the boys rode away, unmindful of the call.

‘The bastards have not come to their senses yet …’ Sitaramappa was still giving vent to his anger when four madiga boys sped across on two more bicycles.

He shouted at them too.

They did not care.

Gradually, it became something of a locust race and a rally of about twenty-five bicycles rode past, as if making a statement: ‘We don’t care for what you say.’

Sitaramappa and Anjaneyulu Naidu stood aghast. They realized that this was one of Suresh’s plans when they saw him on the last bicycle.

‘Do you realize, Maamaa? Yesterday, we shouted at the single boy who passed this way on a bicycle and punished him. Today, there are fifty or sixty boys here, riding bicycles right in front of us. See, Maamaa, that is the change this Suresh fellow has brought about among these low-caste scoundrels.’

‘Okay, okay, let it pass … We will watch and see what they are up to,’ said Sitaramappa, throwing the cigarette butt on the street with a vengeance.

That night, all the village elders met at the house of Sarpanch Shankarayya, Sitaramappa’s son-in-law. Though everybody knew what had happened that morning, Sitaramappa explained how it was going to challenge the upper-caste hold over the village.

He planted the glint of hatred in every head there, and turned it into a glowing fire by the time the meeting had ended.

[…]

While all this was happening, Suresh was relaxing, leafing through a magazine.

The rice for the evening meal was on the stove. Suresh would stir it occasionally and go back to his reading.

The timepiece on the corner of the bookshelf showed half past eight.

A couple of insects were making ferocious rounds of the dim lamp.

Suresh was satisfied with the success of that day’s bicycle rally, but felt no great elation. He was not the type to be overwhelmed by the very first step.

There were still so many steps to climb. His experience had taught him that dalits had to break free in small steps.

Communists say that wherever there is oppression, there will be resistance. This applies to Suresh too. He was born into an oppressed and depressed caste. Maybe that was the real reason for his conscious resistance. He was born in a dalit colony in Vajra Karur near Uravakonda. His father and mother died in a road accident when he was a kid. His aunt had brought him up. He studied for his degree while living in a hostel in Guntakal. He then joined a voluntary organization without waiting for a government job. When he arrived in Krishnapuram, he was appalled to see the conditions there. He was moved by the way those from the main village and the upper castes treated dalits there. More specifically, an incident that had taken place two months ago had completely changed his viewpoint. It always preyed on Suresh’s memory.

[…]

In the madiga locality, several people had gathered in front of Hanumantu’s house.

It was already dark and the street lights had been lit. Hanumantu’s father Kollappa had died that morning. Though he had his full of life and had been ailing for some time, with his death, a melancholic mood settled on the locality. He had been a respected elder in his day. Whenever there was any trouble in the area, Kollappa was the one to settle it. When a marriage was being fixed, his advice was sought. The other elders accepted whatever dowry or customs he laid down. Two years ago, his wife had died

of a snake-bite. Since then, his head had been all awry. He began to lose weight. Within a year, he had started gasping for breath and developed a nagging cough. He coughed as if his lungs would come out of his mouth. Hanumantu had taken his father to Anantapur, consulted many doctors and bought costly medicines. Still, Kollappa's condition did not improve. Finally the cough took his life. Hanumantu loved his father a great deal. He had been crying since morning. His wife and two children sat there, looking sad. Neighbours took the two girls to their homes and fed them. They thought that Kollappa's relatives would come by in the afternoon and waited. By seven in the evening, everybody had turned up, except Hanumantu's sister and brother-in-law. Even at 8.30, they were not in sight. They did not live very far—in fact, they were right there in Kadiri. Everybody wondered why they hadn't come even after someone had been sent to bring them. People from the madiga colony were all either waiting on the Maremma bund, or here and there in front of houses, some in groups and some singly, some sitting and some standing, chit-chatting. Some people were saying that the sister and her husband would arrive by the last bus from Anantapur. Suresh sat at the base of the flagpole in front of Maremma temple. He was talking to a group of youth around him. One of the boys told him that a grave had been dug at the cemetery on the bank of Penneru.

'If they don't come, the dead body cannot be taken today,' said another boy.

Narayanappa, sitting nearby, overheard this and said, 'But how can we do that? Once the grave is dug, it cannot sleep empty overnight.'

Easwarappa, sitting next to him, added, lighting his beedi, 'No, no, they will come. Sure they will come by the last bus. Why are you worried?'

Suresh could not understand what they meant by 'a grave not sleeping empty overnight'. He asked Peddanna, who was sitting next to him.

'If a grave is dug to bury a dead body and left empty overnight, another dead body will be ready for it by the next morning. That's why, if for some reason it is not possible to perform the burial before nightfall, they throw a coconut into the empty grave. That takes care of it,' explained Peddanna.

Even the coffin was ready for the body.

Everybody was anxiously looking towards the lane beside the Maremma temple since Hanumantu's sister and brother-in-law would take that route.

'Remember what happened five years ago … Blind Obulappa died and, even by late evening, his younger son and daughter-in-law did not arrive from Bellary. The body began to decompose and stink. What were they to do? Obulappa's older sons said they would carry on. We thought that was okay and took the body to the riverbank. We put the body into the ditch and began covering it with soil. While we were sprinkling the soil,

they arrived and were very upset. They cried a lot. But what could be done so late? They were not able to take a last look at their father's face. The younger son insisted that he should see his father for the last time. A dead body that is already buried cannot be taken out. We explained that to him and brought him back to the village,' Narayanappa recalled.

'Will something like that happen again this time?' wondered Peddanna.

Suddenly they heard cries from the lane beside the Maremma temple. Hanumantu's sister was wailing. Her husband was with her and trying to comfort her.

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

As the two drew close to where the body lay, Hanumantu and his close relations began crying again, intensely. The entire madiga locality reverberated with cries.

The body was shifted into the coffin without further delay. A rented petromax lamp was lit. The lamp hesitated for a while, blinkered and finally decided to glow dimly. Then anguish engulfed the gathering; there was no path they could take to the cemetery. Until then, nobody had considered this problem.

Normally, they would have used a small path that led from the madiga colony to the cemetery on the riverbank. If a dead body were to be carried on the regular path alongside the village, the villagers and landlords would object. All these days, the madigas had used the footpath to go to the cemetery. But, three months ago, Pedda Naidu, who planned to set up an orchard, had bought up all the land beside the madiga locality. He had fenced the entire area with thorn bushes. Since there had not been a single death in the last six months in either the mala or the madiga communities, the question of what route a funeral procession would take did not arise. But now the big question was: how were they to take the body to the cemetery?

On the one hand, all the rituals that should take place before lifting the dead body were happening. On the other, people began debating which route to use to carry the body to the cemetery. Apart from the path across the village, there was another one towards the west that went through the mala area. There you had to cross a small stream and some fields to finally approach the river on the east. That route was at least three miles long. Besides, even this roundabout route was blocked by thorny bushes.

Some people suggested they should take this route.

'At this hour, it is not possible to take that route. We can't take the route even if it is daylight,' said Peddanna. Everybody agreed that this was true.

Suresh was watching this drama sitting by the dead body. He felt the debate would go on in this manner if he didn't intervene.

'Hey friends, please listen to me,' Suresh said, speaking over the din.

Hanumantu asked, 'What is it, Anna?'[3] Everyone looked towards Suresh.

'Now it is already past nine. If we go on talking like this, it will be midnight before we are done. There are only two possible routes if we leave out the one that has been fenced. One is across the village and the other this roundabout one. Everybody says the roundabout route is difficult even in daylight. At dead of night, taking a corpse with only a dim petromax lamp for light—and that too when there are so many of us—how is that possible? The village route is better. Why not use that? If anybody objects, we have a valid reason, don't we? We will tell them that. "Since Pedda Naidu raised a fence around his grove, it is not possible to use that route." We will tell them that. After all, they are also human beings. Can't they understand this much? It is because you are so diffident about doing anything that our life is going to dogs like this. Don't put unnecessary ideas into the villagers' heads. Let's go. Pick up the body.' Suresh infused courage into them and prepared them for the task.

The youth there felt encouraged and lifted the body. The relatives began wailing louder.

The dim light of the petromax lamp was followed by the dead body of Kollappa.

All the men and women of the madiga colony joined the funeral procession. Suresh also followed at the end.

The body passed the madiga colony … it reached the edge of the village …

Since it was past nine in the night, there were few people about. Near the village square, the funeral procession turned eastward.

Just after the village, there was a series of haystacks.

Exactly at the point where the village ended, they heard loud noises and calls from behind.

The procession stopped.

Everybody looked back.

'Hey, stop there. Fuck your mothers! Who is that? … How dare you carry a cadaver across the village?' It was a thunderous shout.

'You there, stop. We warn you! Can't you hear us?'

'Take another step and your heads will be chopped off …'

The shouts and yells came closer. There were about thirty youngsters and older people.

The gang drew close to the funeral procession.

'What is this, madiga bastards … have your eyes closed with pride? Has any madiga corpse been carried along this route at any time? Why have you started this unheard-of

practice today?' Chidambara Reddy poured fire.

'My lord, please forgive us, Master. We did not do it deliberately. Sir, the route from our madiga colony was closed by Pedda Naidu's grove. That is why we had to use this route,' pleaded Hanumantu.

'How does it matter to us if Pedda Naidu's grove obstructed your way? Is that a valid reason to carry a corpse through the village?' asked Jagannatha Naidu.

'These swines have become arrogant. The bastard government lifts them up onto its head with all the benefits it provides. That's the problem,' said Venkat Reddy.

'We made a mistake, Sir, we accept that. Please accommodate this and forgive us once. Already it is midnight. Please have some sympathy for our plight,' said Narayanappa.

'What, Narayana, son of a bitch, why should we accommodate? Madiga bastards should behave like madigas. So you want to carry your corpse through the village like upper-caste people! How dare you? They say Pedda Naidu's grove is obstructing them. So what is to be done if that route is closed? Just bury the corpse in front of the house!' said Sitaramappa.

'My lord, Sir, you are big people. You can yell at us, and we have to bear with it. We cannot survive if we do not live at your feet. At least for this one time, forgive us and let us go,' pleaded Narayanappa with utmost humility.

Suresh was deeply saddened by the pathos and submissiveness in Naryanappa's voice.

'Yes, Sir, we are little people, we earn our living by making your shoes. My lord, we prostrate before you; we touch your feet. Please show us some benevolence and let us go. See, there is a dead body here; see that and let us go,' Hanumantu wailed. He choked as he wept.

'Hey, stop pretending to be obedient. If you don't divert the corpse now, all of you will become corpses in the end. There will be nobody to pull your dead bodies even, bastards,' roared Sankaraiah, who had been silently watching the madigas till then.

'Lord, please don't say that. With one more step, we'll have crossed the village. Forgive our error this time, Sir,' said Hanumantu falling on his knees in front of the landlords and touching the earth before their feet as if saluting them.

Suresh thought this posture and the tears in Hanumantu's eyes would melt any cruel, stone-hearted person. But the landlords were not in a mood to loosen up.

'If today we allow your madiga corpse, won't the mala bastards ask the same tomorrow? They will also bring their dead bodies this way. We cannot just sit back and watch when you carry your dead along this path. Go to the small rivulet and from there

you can reach Penneru. Take that route. We won't allow you to use this route. Turn back. Get out,' said Sitaramappa.

Suresh's blood boiled when he heard the landlords speak. Had it been any other occasion he would have retorted sharply, unmindful of consequences. But now it was a question of a dead body and a funeral. He decided to speak gently and said in a soft voice: 'Landlord, one word. The small gorge you are suggesting would be okay if it were daytime. This is dark night. It is already ten o'clock. You also know that turning back a dead body is a bad omen. Please let us go this time.'

'Who are you? Which village you are from? Bastard, coming from another village, are you trying to teach us landlords here?' barked Chidambara Reddy.

'Hey, pull this rascal out. It seems these madiga sons of bitches are not going to listen to us. Thrash them and throw them out,' said Ramakrishna Naidu in a loud voice.

Suresh's anger reached a pinnacle. His eyes reddened. But Peddanna, who thought an outburst at this time would be dangerous, pulled him aside.

'Don't you have brains? What do you think? Can we afford to pick a fight with the landlords with a dead body on our side?' Peddanna whispered.

'Please don't stop me, Peddanna,' said Suresh. His nostrils were shivering with rage.

Seeing all this, Narayanappa said, 'Suresh, please have patience. They are landlords. You are new to this village. Please don't say anything now.'

Suresh stood back, silent.

'Is it a bad omen to take the dead body back? So be it. Will all of you in the madiga locality become dead bodies with the omen? No worry. We can get our sandals stitched in the neighbouring village. Listen, even these madiga scamps are now talking about bad omens!' said Sarpanch Sankaraiah.

'Yes, move back. If you stay a minute longer, we'll beat your backs like drums. All of you, turn back along with the corpse and don't ever set your eyes on this side,' Sitaramappa admonished.

The helpless coffin turned back. The entire madiga locality followed. As they walked back, the landlords followed them with triumphant whistles, laughs, catcalls and loud comments.

It was almost one o'clock by the time the funeral procession reached the bank of Penneru through the small gorge. By the time they had buried the body and come back to their colony, it was early morning. That incident disturbed Suresh deeply. It is because of the lack of awareness among malas and madigas that the landlords were able to ride

roughshod over us like this. Suresh thought, no matter what happens, these dalits should be made aware. The bicycle rally was a result of that thought.

'Sureshanna …' A call from outside.

'Who's that?' asked Suresh peeping out.

Sivaiah said, 'It's me …'

'Oh, Sivaiah, it's you. Come in, come in. Are you a stranger that you call out and stand there like that? You can just walk in.'

Sivaiah came in and sat down. His hair was well oiled and combed perfectly. It shone in the light.

'When did you come from Anantapur, Sivaiah?' asked Suresh, stirring the rice. He picked up a piece of fine cloth to strain the rice-water into a small tumbler.

'About an hour ago, Anna. What is this? Nobody is around? There were always a lot of people here!'

'Until a few minutes ago, there were so many people that not a grain of sand would have dropped to the floor. It is only ten minutes now since they left to eat their evening meal. Just wait. Another five minutes, and you will have a crowd.' As he said that, Suresh finished straining the rice and put the utensil back on the stove to dry the rice out.

'I heard that there was a bicycle rally in village,' said Sivaiah.

'Oh then you know everything.' Suresh smiled.

'You know Mallesh … Just as I reached, even before I had washed my feet and hands, he told me everything.'

'Anyway, now that you know everything, Sivaiah, tell me whether what we did was right or wrong,' Suresh asked with a smile.

Sivaiah was silent.

Suresh thought the rice was dry enough and turned off the stove.

Since there was no response from Sivaiah, Suresh looked at him. Sivaiah was staring at the smiling face of a baby on the wall calendar.

'What does it mean if you keep quiet when I ask whether it was right or wrong?'

Sivaiah startled back to attention. 'Anna?'

Suresh repeated his question.

'I can't say it was wrong … but we [the landlords and the madigas] have to see each other's faces every day. They are landlords. They are full of caste arrogance. They are afraid of losing their control over the people under them. That's why they thrashed Naganna. If we protest like this, will we not have to face drastic consequences

tomorrow?' Sivaiah said, slowly. As a person who understood the weight and consequences of Suresh's actions, Sivaiah could not spell out his response in a hurry.

'Oh ho, keep quiet Sivaiahanna! You are a follower of Gandhi's religion and Jesus Christ's theories. This is not the age for them. If the other person raises his hand to slap us, even before his palm touches us, we should hit him and cause his thirty-two teeth to fall down. You know something, only then will the landlords realize their place and behave. This is rocket age, Sivaiahanna, this is no longer the age of Sankaracharyas and Madhavacharyas …'

'No, no, it's not like that. You are becoming furious unnecessarily. Be patient and think it over. Any change will take time. How submissive our grandfathers were in front of the landlords. They would not even walk on the street where the landlords were moving about. In our fathers' generation, they used to walk, but with bent knees. Today, who bends? Everybody walks upright. Once upon a time, our ancestors used to be served their drink in coconut shells. Now they have changed to cheap aluminium tumblers. That's how change comes—slowly, like the hour needle in a clock. It doesn't come fast, like the seconds needle, you know.'

'Sivaiah, you have a lot of patience. A person like you feels happy with whatever change has taken place. Seeing an injustice, he feels satisfied that larger injustice has not taken place. Indeed, this is the mindset of a slave. If Dr Ambedkar thought like you, he would not have written such large tomes and bought antagonism from the big, big Hindu leaders of those days. Sivaiah, we cannot sit idle, thinking that change will come anyway. We have to put our hand in and help bring about that change faster. If Veeresalingam had thought change would come some day, and not acted, would it have been socially respectable for widows to remarry even today? If Raja Rammohun Roy was not there, would practices like sati have ceased even today? Tell me … either for good or bad, English education resulted in some benefits. That's how these sorts of reforms could take place.'

Sivaiah listened to everything silently. Did not utter a word.

'Sivaiah, wash your hands. Let's eat,' said Suresh handing him the tumbler of water.

Sivaiah said he was not hungry.

'But I am famished. I will have my dinner,' said Suresh, serving himself the rice and taking out some tamarind pickle from a bottle. He began eating.

'What you say is true, but, Anna, I am afraid that Sitaramappa might plan something that will harm our dalits,' said Sivaiah hesitantly.

'Let him plan. Is he alone in this world? Is there no government? We will complain to police. If not, we will send petitions to the collector and the CM [chief minister].'

‘All that is fine. But aren’t all those in the government also from the same caste? Even today, what response has there been to what took place in Chunduru? I am afraid that we may also become victims like that …’

Suresh laughed at Sivaiah. ‘Oh Sivaiahanna, you are imagining too much. Another Chunduru, another Neerukonda, another Karamchedu in the making. But these landlords do not seem to have so much power.’

‘Never underestimate them.’

‘You overestimate them. Those bastards are not that courageous!’

He finished eating while talking and sat back, relaxed, leaning against the wall.

‘Sivaiah, I have heard about Purushotham. I don’t know much about him. All our people here speak very highly of him. When I see you and hear you, I feel you had fantastic strength earlier and it was he who drained all that. You know why I say this. Those born into upper castes, however progressive they may appear, inside they will be reactionaries. That is my opinion. I may be wrong. But after seeing you, I feel my opinion is right.’

Suresh said this looking out of the house. That’s why he could not see the reaction on Sivaiah’s face. Anyway, all he wanted to do was tease Sivaiah a little.

‘Please, never speak like this again. I’m sorry,’ Sivaiah said as he stood up. His nostrils were quivering with anger.

Suresh laughed and tried to hold him back, grabbing hold of his right arm.

‘I’m sorry. I made a mistake coming here. I don’t want to talk about anything any more,’ Sivaiah said, wrenching his arm away.

But Suresh did not let go. ‘Sivaiah, please don’t be so upset …’

‘I am not at all upset. Your words pained me, that is all. What do you know about Purushothamanna in the first place? Something that might have happened to you makes you feel that way—and you are just generalizing from that. One should not do that.’

‘Sivaiah, don’t get so agitated … You respect me, do you not?’

‘I respect you a lot. That’s why I came here.’

‘Then sit down.’

‘Only if you take back your words!’

‘I have not given you anything that I might take it back! There is nothing to withdraw …’

‘Anna, don’t joke with me. It is enough if you accept that what you said about Purushothamanna is wrong,’ said Sivaiah, sitting down again.

‘You have to prove me wrong. If you prove that, I will certainly apologize—is that okay?’

‘You said so many things against Purushothamanna. He may have made some mistakes unknowingly. But he always tells me that we have to think twice before doing anything. In fact, about you …’ Sivaiah stopped.

‘Yes, go on … about me,’ Suresh was excited.

Suresh was surprised when Sivaiah told him how much praise Purushotham had for Suresh, and how he admitted that he himself did no progressive work.

When he heard that, Suresh took back what he had said.

Sivaiah calmed down.

As they were talking, five young men from the mala locality arrived.

‘Have you drunk your supper?’ asked Suresh.

‘No one in these regions can match Sureshanna when it comes to the local idiom. We used to hear this drinking supper thing from our old people. After you came, the phrase has caught on again and it has become common to speak of the evening as time to drink supper. We had almost forgotten that expression,’ said Venkataramudu. He sat leaning against the wall, laughing as he lit his beedi.

‘Tell him, Anna, why we have come here. No point in just chit-chatting and leaving, and forgetting the real issue,’ Mallesu chided.

‘What is it, Mallesa,’ Suresh asked.

‘The thing is, Sitaramappa and all the big men in the village have assembled at the sarpanch’s house.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Our Anjinigadu works in the sarpanch’s house. He told us. All the big men of the village are assembled there and conspiring against us. You are their particular target. They believe that all the malas and madigas are behaving like this because of you. If this is allowed to go further, they suspect that we will also enter the Anjaneyaswamy temple … That’s why they are thinking of getting you removed from your job. They are going to talk to your project chairman,’ Mallesu continued.

Suresh laughed loudly. ‘Okay, what else?’

‘What is that? Isn’t it difficult if you lose your job?’ asked Venkataramudu.

‘Do they have such guts, Venkataramudu? Our chairman will not heed what people like these say. He is a Bengali. If they ask him to remove me, he will raise my salary and insist that I stay here.’

‘Is that so?’ wondered Mallesu.

‘He is really powerful … He did not post me here to live at these people’s mercy. I am posted here to teach the malas and madigas. If *you* ask him to remove me, he will not keep me here for a minute longer. That’s the thing. If the bastards know this secret, they may pressure you to seek my removal. So please forget what I said. These sons of bitches cannot do me any harm.’

Sivaiah looked at them puzzled.

‘Oh Siva, when did you come? How is Purushothamanna?’ asked Venkataramudu.

‘Okay,’ Sivaiah replied.

‘If only Purushothamanna was here at this time, it would have been different,’ said Venkataramudu.

Sivaiah looked at Suresh as if to say, ‘See what Purushothamanna means in these parts.’

Suresh smiled. He understood the meaning of Sivaiah’s look.

Soon some madiga youth also joined them.

The meeting at the sarpanch’s house became the issue for discussion.

The room was filled with the din of all the talk.

‘Hey, please. Be quiet. One word here,’ Suresh clapped to draw attention.

Slowly the noise died down.

‘Friends, my brothers, you—sorry—we, created tremors in the upper castes with our bicycle rally this afternoon. This is good. In a way. The information brought by our friends Venkataramudu and Mallesu shows that our bicycle rally, which was meant to hit our opponents, achieved success.

‘But this is only our first step. We have taken this first step after a lot of thought. Now we cannot take back that step. In the coming days, we need to take more steps and move ahead fast. Our malas and madigas were subjugated and oppressed by the upper castes, who in these parts are the reddys and kammas. This oppression still continues. We will not challenge them directly. Our challenge is indirect. The earth under their feet trembles with this indirect challenge of ours.’

‘What do you mean by indirect challenge?’

‘As if you know what direct challenge means,’ teased Mallesu.

‘I don’t know. But do you?’ Venkataramudu retorted.

‘Uhu, no, I don’t know,’ said Mallesu, suppressing his laugh.

‘Don’t boast’ was the meaning of the look Venkataramudu gave Mallesu.

‘What is this? When Sureshanna is telling us something, why do you butt in and disturb him?’ Sivaiah admonished.

‘Sivaiah, Sivaiah, let them ask. I was going on and on with my lecture. That was my mistake. With our habit of talking to intellectuals and leaders in towns, we speak here also in the same tone. If we want to reach people here, we have to search for words,’ said Suresh in a pleasing tone.

‘Sorry, Anna,’ said a visibly upset Sivaiah.

‘It’s okay Sivaiah. Here we have to show some restraint. There is no other way,’ he told Sivaiah and turned to others and said: ‘Listen to me. Our friend Venkataramudu asked what indirect challenge means. First let me tell you what direct challenge is, and then we can go to indirect challenge …

‘Yesterday our friend Naganna was beaten up by Sitaramappa for riding a bicycle in their locality. If all of us gathered and went to Sitaramappa with sticks and asked him who was he and how dare he thrash our man, it would have been a direct challenge. But we did not do that. We did not say anything to them and, as if we knew nothing about it, sixty of us rode thirty bicycles all over the village. This is called indirect challenge. One cannot deny that it’s a challenge. However, it is more powerful than a direct challenge.

‘That’s why there is such tremor in their hearts. That’s why they are dumbfounded. That’s why they are shaken. Do you understand now? What Venkataramudu …’

Venkataramudu nodded seriously.

Sivaiah looked at Suresh, astonished.

‘Okay, now we will come to the point … From now on, we have to make these indirect challenges quite often. Today, our dalits are not allowed into any shop in the village. Not even into the coffee vendor’s hut. We have to stand outside and they serve us in cheap aluminium tumblers. We have to challenge this. After that, we have to enter the Anjaneyaswamy temple in the village,’ said Suresh, looking intently at everyone.

‘Oh, that’s no big deal! We can do that,’ said a young madiga.

‘This brother is so enthusiastic. His enthusiasm should be appreciated. But the issues I speak of are not easy. Not only that, you have to understand that they are not as easy as the bicycle rally. If we want to take up these programmes, we have to gain self-confidence. Indeed, we may find opposition from our own castes. The landlords might not leave any stone unturned to punish us. Even then, if we are united, nobody can hurt us,’ Suresh said.

‘Seeing your zeal, I too want to become one among you,’ said Sivaiah, smiling warmly.

‘I wonder whether you are the same Sivaiah who debated with me a little while ago. You will always be one of us, Sivaiah. Whenever you come from town, you can join us in all our activities. Also, bring Purushotham when you come next time. That will make us happy. We all will learn whatever new things he has to tell us,’ Suresh said, embracing Sivaiah affectionately.

‘No, no. You are talking about entry into temple and protesting the special glass system in tea shops. Aren’t you? I will join all your activities … Shall we begin tomorrow?’ Sivaiah asked, impatiently.

Suresh smiled at Sivaiah.

‘Sivaiah, that much hurry doesn’t help. Do you plan to join these protests in the morning and catch the afternoon bus to Anantapur? This is not as easy as talking. In fact, the beginning has to be made cautiously. We are not facing ordinary people. We have to confront these landlords whose blood is filled with old ideas, orthodox rigidities and traditional culture. They are feudal landlords. They belong to the castes that enjoy power at the central and state levels. If we falter even one step, these caste authoritarians can erase our footsteps eternally. You know, that’s why we have taken these decisions now. When and how to implement the decisions, we cannot yet say without deeper discussions,’ said Suresh slowly.

Sivaiah was disappointed by this. He wondered whether Suresh had understood him. Why was he repeating what Sivaiah himself had said a little while ago?

[…]

Sivaiah came back home, had dinner and slept under the open sky. He could not sleep for a long time.

The discussion with Suresh kept coming back to him, again and again.

During the early days of his acquaintance, Sivaiah went to Suresh one afternoon as he sat reading something in front of the Maremma temple.

For a while, they chatted about this and that.

After that, the discussion moved to the annihilation of caste and, naturally, references to Gandhi and Ambedkar came up.

Suresh angrily said that Gandhiji had done enormous harm to dalits.

Since childhood, Sivaiah had held Gandhi in tremendous respect and admired him greatly. Sivaiah believed that all the credit for the uplift of harijans these days should go to Gandhi.

That’s why he was angry about what Suresh had said.

‘It’s a lie. I don’t trust you. You are the first person to talk so meanly about Gandhiji,’ said Sivaiah. He began praising Gandhi’s nobility and gave the reasons why he dressed

so simply. How could Suresh say Gandhiji had done harm to harijans, when Gandhiji himself ran the journal *Harijan*?

'Sivaiah, calm down. Gandhi gave all dalits—that is malas and madigas—a single name. He called them "harijans" … this name applies to all the dalits in our country, doesn't it?' Suresh slowly began.

'Yes, "harijan" means people of god!'

'Wait, wait. Sivaiah, don't be in such a hurry to explain. Suppose a mala or a madiga from our state goes to Kerala or Bengal. If he mentions his caste there, those people would simply think it was one of many castes and respect him. Similarly, if a Gujarati dalit comes here and tells us his caste, nobody will think anything. The reason is, nobody knows what that caste name means. Gandhi did not want these lower-caste, untouchable people get such respectful treatment outside their areas. That's why he gave an all-India name to our people so that we would easily be recognized everywhere. That's what harijan means. That way, he created a brand known all over the country and hung it around our necks. Our dalit world was not able to realize this conspiracy until Ambedkar came and analysed this.'

Sivaiah could not digest the argument as Suresh elaborated it.

Ambedkar might be a great man, but he could not be greater than Gandhiji, Sivaiah believed strongly.

That day, Sivaiah left in anger. But Suresh did not just drop the matter. He went to Sivaiah's house and apologized.

'Please read Ambedkar's writings. You will know what is right and what is wrong,' he advised.

Sivaiah said okay, but did not do it. That could have been because of his prejudice against Ambedkar.

However, today Sivaiah considers Suresh a soaring personality. He is the personification of a leader with true love for dalits, Sivaiah thinks.

Katti Padma Rao

‘It was my Sanskrit education that actually showed me the gravity of untouchability,’ says Katti Padma Rao. An eminent dalit leader and activist from the 1980s and ’90s and a highly regarded Sanskrit scholar, Padma Rao is, in fact, a first-generation literate. He was born in 1953 to Manikyamba and Subbarao, both of them unschooled labourers; and was the eldest son in a family of five children. Six months of the year, his parents worked for ILTD (Indian Leaf Tobacco Development Ltd), a Guntur-based tobacco company, going back to their village and to agriculture for the other six months. In Guntur, they lived in a locality near the company.

‘The distinctions were clear to me from very early on. Within ILTD, there were few caste distinctions. My father was addressed respectfully, as Maistri. In the village, the kammas were dominant and they would call out to him with a rude, “Orey!” Our village was near the main road, so things were not so stark. But I often had to fetch water from a neighbouring village, where I had to wait for the “rajulu” [kammas are often spoken of as rajulu or kings] to come by and draw it for me.’

Padma Rao’s mother was Christian, so the children went to Sunday school. ‘The Christian influence is an important one in our lives,’ he says. ‘It shaped us ethically. We did not drink or smoke, and we tried to live a clean, non-corrupt life.’ The Bible was an early and continuing inspiration—he recalls verses from the Song of Solomon where a woman declares, ‘I am black, I am beautiful.’ The first songs he learnt and sang were Christian songs. It was from his parents that he developed determination and a ‘fighting nature’. ‘Even the police would not enter the house if my mother was there. Every summer they would apprentice me to some teacher or the other. “Whatever you do, do it with complete concentration,” was the lesson I learnt from them. I still try and wake up at two in the morning every day. Ability is not enough; concentration and hard work are essential if we are to achieve anything.’

School was another shaping force. Padma Rao studied at the Andhra Ratna Duggirala Gopala Krishna High School. It had a strength of 1,800 students, of which 800 were from the scheduled castes. The headmaster was SC; so were the drill master and some other teachers. The educational experience was a rich one: children took part in debates, recitations, burrakatha performances and were exposed to the other arts. The NCC was active and the school had many excellent athletes—some of whom competed

at the national level. ‘We learnt that we can, we will, should, shall; that we should push on, fearful not even of death.’

By the time he was sixteen, Padma Rao had distinguished himself at school. A play he wrote about the gollas (shepherd caste) who brought a gift of sambrani (frankincense) to the child Christ became famous; he composed burrakathas that brought a common earthy note into the language and the story. ‘At that time, I was an activist for Christianity,’ he says. His Telugu teachers (all brahmin, he comments, mischievously) wanted him to go on to study Sanskrit. His father wanted him to become a collector.

In 1969, he joined the Sanskrit College in Ponnur. He was the first dalit student to join the college. Of the nine lecturers, eight were brahmin; the principal was also brahmin. One lecturer, Kondaveeti Venkatakavi, was kamma. He taught the very first class. Padma Rao was immediately attracted to him. Influenced by Tripuraneni Ramaswamy and the anti-brahmin movement, which was led by the kammas in these regions, Venaktakavi was one of the five non-brahmin pandits, all from that region, who criticized the dominant version of Sanskrit studies. ‘None of the others in the class liked him, but as early as my second day in college, I had become his disciple. My education with him began with antibrahminism; in three months, I had become more—an atheist. He raised questions about Rama that made me understand that all religions are partial.

‘I read voraciously—everything assigned and more. I was a leader among the students, but I had to sit outside the class. Once I asked a question during a class; the teacher abused me; I threw a book at him; he filed a case against me and I was expelled from the college. In four years, I changed five colleges. From Ponnur I went to Tadikonda. There, a brahmin teacher refused to teach Sanskrit grammar to dalits. The principal, Charuvaka Ramakrishna, who was BC himself, took special classes for us at seven in the morning. I was assigned the task of coaching the others. Other teachers believed that some of the sastras should not be taught to non-brahmins.’

On Independence Day that year, four students were chosen to give orations. The three others were brahmin. Padma Rao drew on the skills he had honed in high school and carried the audience with him. ‘Through my oratory, I became a leader,’ he observed. ‘The anti-brahmin movement was led by kammas all over Andhra Pradesh, but I soon became one of its major spokespersons and my reputation as an orator waxed strong.’

In 1972 he spoke at the Ambedkar Jayanti, making a similar impact. ‘I had read some Ambedkar and Chinnaiah’s biography that had come out in Telugu. I changed from a Christian personality to an Ambedkarite personality, and the shift can be charted along five lines: I wrote regularly, every day; I began building a home library; I read for at least five hours every day; and I began working on building institutions—personal change would never be enough. Another motto was that one should always do what one advocates.

'Then in 1973, I read the Manusmriti. I read it in Sanskrit—it had not yet been translated into Telugu. When I saw what it had to say about women and dalits I became very agitated.' He learnt a hundred shlokas by heart and gave speeches all over the state criticizing it. He called it the 'worst book in the world' and burnt copies of it. 'But it is not enough to demolish the book. Weeping is a waste of time. We had to create alternatives.' Padma Rao attempted to do so through his speeches, his activism and his writing.

It was in the context of the 1985 killings at Karamchedu, however, that Padma Rao moved into the foreground as a dalit activist. He was instrumental in the formation of the Dalit Mahasabha and the drafting of its manifesto. Along with others in the Mahasabha, he travelled widely to villages and small towns. His oratorical skills became legendary. 'My experience has been that it is crucially important to be with the people, to live with them in the village and move with them on a day-to-day basis. When I take up an issue, I move into the village, live there until some resolution is achieved. I have never felt tired or unhappy, even when I was in jail or being harassed by the police. I take it as a challenge, and in an Ambedkarian spirit. "Don't be unbending, be brave" is my motto. After the Dalit Mahasabha was formed, all political parties—the CPM, People's War, even Congress and Telugu Desam—had to become responsive to dalit questions and demands.

'Discrimination,' Padma Rao continues, 'is not only material, it is also internal, in the mind. The real challenge is to imagine alternatives, and to imagine boldly, in ways that are not held down by existing ways of thinking. The demands must embody an alternative culture—material, legal, educational. For example, in Karamchedu we asked for land as compensation and got forty-nine acres of land for the dalits. That made it possible for children to study, for new avenues to open up, for new self-respect. They have houses, food, education. For change to take place, the whole village needs to be restructured; social, cultural and philosophical transformations are necessary. When the atrocities took place in Chunduru in 1991, we asked for a special court to be held in the dalit area; for a special public prosecutor to be appointed; for protection for the witnesses. We asked for a meeting in Delhi with the MPs. They said that Hindu sentiment had been hurt in Chunduru because the dead had been buried in the village; that was why the upper castes had left the village. "But Gandhi is also buried in Delhi and no one has left Delhi because of that," I pointed out.'

From 1986 to well into the 1990s, Padma Rao worked closely with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader Kanshi Ram to establish a similar political organization in Andhra Pradesh. He was the general secretary of the BSP in the state. In 1988, he organized a meeting of dalit intellectuals in Ponnur to discuss what an alternative politics would entail. In 1989, Kanshi Ram came to Ponnur to hold discussions with

SC, ST and BC political workers and announced the formation of a Dalitbahujan Party. He also unveiled an Ambedkar statue. In the elections that followed, the Peda Prajala Party (PPP) fielded three candidates (all of whom resigned their jobs to stand for election). 'Kanshi Ram and I developed a good friendship,' Padma Rao says. 'In all of South India, I was the person who was closest to him. He had an excellent political mind. He was focused on a single goal—coming to power. "Speak with your enemies," he used to say. But I believe he did not have a manifesto with the scope that ours had. Our contribution to the BSP is its cultural flavour. I introduced the party to the work of Periyar, Jashuva and so on.' Padma Rao stood for Assembly elections in 1989, 1994 and 2009. In the 2009 elections, he contested as a Prajarajyam Party candidate from Vemuru constituency and polled 23,000 votes.

Padma Rao has a substantial corpus of work, which includes poetry: *Jailu Ghantalu* (Jail Bells, 1986), *Desham Diary* (Diary of the Nation, 1987), *Vimukti Geetam* (Song of Liberation, 1987), *Nallakaluva* (Black Lotus, 1996); writings on Indian culture and history: *Kulam Punadhulu* (The Foundations of Caste, 1981), *Bharateeya Samskrutilo Stree* (Women in Indian Culture, 1992), *Kulam–Pratyamnyaya Samskruti* (Caste and Alternative Culture, 1992), *Dalitula Charitra* (Dalit History, 1991, five volumes); alternative literary criticism: *Dalita Sahitya Vadam—Jashuva* (Dalit Literary Perspective and Jashuva, 1995), *Mahakavi Jashuva Samajika Viplavam* (The Great Poet Jashuva and Social Revolution, 2007); alternative religious thinking: *Charvaka Darshanam* (Charavaka Philosophy, 1991), *Bouddha Darshanam* (The Philosophy of Buddha, 1999); five books on Ambedkar: *Sanghika Viplavamurthy Dr B.R. Ambedkar* (Social Revolutionary Dr B.R. Ambedkar, 1990), *Ambedkar–Gandhi* (2001), *Ambedkar–Marx–Phule* (2001), *Ambedkar–Buddhudu* (Ambedkar and the Buddha, 2002), *Ambedkar–Tatvashastram* (Ambedkar–Philosophy, 2007). He has also published several books in English.

Recent awards conferred on him include the Boyi Bheemanna Trust Award (2006) and the Pratibha Award from the Andhra Pradesh State Government (2006). He was conferred an honorary doctorate by the Acharya Nagarjuna University (2007) for his contribution to dalit literature and social justice.

We have translated here an important essay on the significance of the Karamchedu struggle for the dalit movement.

Karamchedu: A Turning Point in Dalit History

Translated by Kaki Madhava Rao

The Karamchedu struggle is a symbol of the dalit movement for self-respect. It is this movement that not only lit the spark of self-respect for dalits, but also gave shape to it. Karamchedu was a war cry, a volcano, a transformation. It was a movement that awakened dalits and set them on a long march. In the history of the dalit struggle, Karamchedu is akin to Naxalbari in the Marxist–Leninist saga.

The Karamchedu struggle gave birth to many critical events and developed several original forms of agitation. It produced some leaders and many activists. In fact, the Karamchedu struggle is the foundation for all the recent changes in the attitude and stance of dalits.

What Happened in Karamchedu?

Karamchedu is a village in Prakasam district, located seven kilometres from Chirala town. Eight of the sixteen wards in this panchayat are inhabited by kammas, while SC, ST and BCs live in the remaining eight wards. Being dominant in numbers and wealth, the kammas constitute something like a classical feudal society. Drunk with a false sense of caste superiority, they had become immune to modern thinking and social change. Yadava, chakkali, mangali, Muslims, chundu nayak, madiga and mala are the other caste groups in that village. Many hundred kammas owning several thousand acres of land constitute the power centre of the village.

The labourers who work for these big landlords are treated worse than cattle. Corporal punishment is common. On occasion dalits are killed and their bodies disposed of without a trace. A decade or so before the Karamchedu incident, some BCs in the village tried to resist this violence. They were beaten up and silenced. A little later, Venkateswarlu, a chundu nayakulu leader, tried to organize agricultural labour to demand higher wages. When he was thrashed for taking the initiative, he sought refuge in the madigapalle. The kammas demanded that the madigas surrender Venkateswarlu, but they refused. Their defiance was something that the power-drunk kammas could not stomach. And that was the beginning of what became a saga of violence and retribution. Sometime later, the kammas attacked malas. Once again, the madigas came to their rescue. This added fuel to the fire of vengeance that the kammas nurtured against the madigas.

The madigapalle of Karamchedu was initially home to a few families. They multiplied over a period of time into 400 families. Madigas are known for their great sense of self-respect. Their mastery over the bamboo stick is so extraordinary that they can manipulate it both in defensive and offensive movements in tune with a local musical instrument called billamgodu. Though they depend on the agricultural

operations of kammas for their wages, their unity and self-regard remained strong. They managed this through the discipline engendered by their caste elders, and through skilled fighters like Joshuva.

Meanwhile, significant developments were taking place in the kamma community. Leading kammas like Kuppuswamy left the Justice Party, which had been a kamma stronghold in the early decades of the twentieth century. While many of them joined the Congress party, others moved to the Communist party. However, no matter which political party they joined, they always preserved and protected the dominance of their caste in those groups.

In independent India, the kammas of Karamchedu pioneered the cultivation of cash crops such as cotton and tobacco. With that money and advantage, they moved into the film industry. Daggupali Chenchu Ramayya's son, Venkateswara Rao, married the daughter of N.T. Rama Rao, a leading star in the Telugu film industry. This alliance increased the arrogance of the kammas of this village. In rural areas, district-level employees of the revenue and police departments generally tend to serve the dominant caste group. With NTR's daughter marrying into this village, these officials became even more open to the influence of the kammas. The emergence of N.T. Rama Rao as chief minister in 1983 added substantial political clout to their already existing economic power and caste arrogance. The kammas began treating other castes with contempt, resorting even to physical assaults and molestation of women. A young kamma, Yerram Venkatesu, entered the house of Thirupatayya, who was of the yerukula tribe, and tried to molest his daughter. When her parents tried to prevent him, they were beaten up. Dalit youth residing in the neighbourhood intervened and chased Venkatesu away. This incident too enraged the kammas. In Karamchedu, the mala, madiga and yerukula habitations were adjacent to each other. The hall in which kamma marriages were conducted was located close to these habitations. Dalit women had to pass the marriage hall to make use of the nearby bund to answer calls of nature. Kamma youth, particularly Lakshmiah, Venkateswarlu and their buddies, who hung around the marriage hall, used to make snide comments when dalit women walked past. Dalit youth objected to this harassment. This added to the resentment that the kammas felt.

After the Telugu Desam Party, led by NTR, was formed, the kammas of Karamchedu joined that party, en masse. But the dalits remained with the Congress party. Chenchu Ramayya's son, Venkateswara Rao, who had married one of N.T. Rama Rao's daughters, contested in the assembly elections on a Telugu Desam ticket. Chenchu Ramayya sent for the dalits and asked them to vote for his son. The dalits replied that they would think about it. While the voting was taking place, the kammas, suspecting that the dalits were voting for the Congress candidate, tried to obstruct the poll. However, the dalits went ahead with their voting. There is no way the kammas could

tolerate this unity or the defiant attitude shown by the dalits. What is more, they were just waiting for an occasion to crush the dalits.

On 16 July 1985, two kamma youth, Pothina Seenu and Rayaneedu Prasad, were cleaning vessels used for feeding their cattle and washing out the leftovers into the drinking water tank of the madigas. Kathi Chandriah, a physically disabled dalit boy, objected to this. Just as they were about to beat him up, a dalit woman, Munnangi Suvartha, came to fetch water from the tank. She tried to protect the dalit boy. They hurled a hunting knife at her and Suvartha raised her vessel to ward off the weapon.

This raising of a vessel by a dalit woman against the kammas was seen by them as a serious challenge to the power, dominance and supremacy of the kammas. They decided it was time to crush this defiance. But they realized that kammas of Karamchedu alone could not fight the dalits. They gathered the kammas from seven neighbouring villages and loaded their tractors with bamboo sticks and country javelins. The very next day (on 17 July), they raided the dalitwada. They attacked men with the weapons, raped dalit women and chased the outnumbered dalits across the fields for seven kilometres. Such a ferocious and barbaric attack may not have a parallel anywhere in India. In this attack, Duddu Moshe, Duddu Ramesh, Thella Yeshova, Thella Moshe, Thella Mattayya and Duddu Abraham were killed. Though eight dalits were killed, only those six were identified. The police buried the two other bodies without giving the kith and kin an opportunity to identify them.

We can understand this ferocity only when we analyse the economic and sociological background against which the event played out. Growing literacy (slowly though it may be) among the dalit families engendered a social awareness among the community that led them to resist the excesses of neo-feudalism. The towering leadership of Dr Ambedkar and his philosophy had spread social awareness among dalits. The rising sense of justice among them and the inhuman acts of the oppressors made the contradictions between the two groups starker. The contradictions sometimes raised the hope of organizational unity and at other times resulted in forms of struggle. However, it only created an occasional spark here and some heat there, never evolving into a burning fire.

In a parallel development, the landed gentry also started to organize themselves to safeguard their interests. They did this in two ways. One was to adopt the brahmin strategy of dividing the oppressed and weakening their struggle. The second was to capture the government machinery and use it to crush their adversaries. The oppressors used the intellectuals among them to ensure that dalit action on the above two fronts did not converge. Whenever there was a near chance of convergence, the intellectuals of the oppressor group frustrated it by cleverly posing as the champions of the oppressed. They used the media and their ideologues to see that the movements against the

oppressors did not get adequate publicity and thus prevented reaction among the oppressed. They pictured the atrocities as class oppression, rather than as caste oppression, and tried to protect the kamma caste group. When Mr U. Sambasiva Rao and Kancha Ilaiah, both backward class activists, wrote a pamphlet titled 'Attack by the kamma landlords of Karamchedu', the People's War party deleted the word 'kamma' from the title. This explains why the agitation against the torching of Kotesu in Kanchikacherla village took only the shape of a reaction to the incident and did not develop as a mass movement.

The casteist, feudal and fascist forces in Karamchedu village epitomize those operative in the rural scene. It is the reaction of the oppressed against this deadly combination that led to the eruption of a major conflict. Daggupali Chenchu Ramayya was the chieftain of the oppressor group. The situation in other villages was no better. The reign of terror against the oppressed by the old dominant castes, who had now become land-grabbers, industrialists and holders of political power, continued for a decade as the result of a new strategy. That strategy was to organize caste groups and village groups to counter the fighting spirit of the dalits. Earlier they used to torture, maim, molest or kill individual dalits. When the oppressed of Karamchedu joined together, the oppressors brought together forces from seven villages and deployed tractors and deadly weapons to fight them. The ferocity of this attack is an indication of the potential of the oppressed to resist oppression. Axes, crowbars, lathis were natural instruments of production for the labourers who work in the fields. One never hears of a barber using his shaving blade to cut a customer's throat, a fisherman using his net to entrap a woman, or an earth-worker using the crowbar to spear another person. But the oppressors started using these productive instruments as offensive weapons. Where political power, wealth and caste domination combine to suppress the poor, it should not be looked at or analysed from a mere class angle or perspective. It is necessary to study it from social, economic and political power perspective.

Birth of Karamchedu Movement

The Karamchedu movement arose from an ideological base. The perpetrators of that massacre too had their own philosophy. Kammas from a group of villages combined their economic strength, political power and superior caste position to kill, rape and maim dalits who resisted them. When they attacked dalits in Karamchedu, they were not simply tackling the defiance of dalits in one village; they were proclaiming the success of their philosophy. Those who want to oppose this new kamma philosophy cannot succeed if they analyse the incident only as class exploitation. They can fight it only with a counter-philosophy: the annihilation of caste. The Karamchedu struggle was born from precisely that philosophy. The oppressors swung into action, deriding the struggle

as casteist. They put forth two arguments to make their case. One, they attributed the atrocity to the huge wealth of the landlords. Two, they said that it had not happened as a result of caste rivalry between kammas and dalits. The leadership of the Karamchedu struggle challenged this with a poser: on what platform, or under what name, were the attackers from the seven villages brought together? Were they the rich from all castes or were they just the kammas? What role did cultural, economic and political factors play in this incident? How was it possible to fight caste dominance through class struggle? Can the struggle against caste dominance be successful except as a struggle for the annihilation of caste?

The Karamchedu movement has proved that the brahminical ideology of superior and inferior castes can be fought only through the ideology of annihilation of caste. This movement also renamed the groups that were until then addressed as SCs and harijans with a broader term, 'dalit'. It positioned dalit literature and dalit philosophy as an alternative to the forms of dominant culture. It consolidated the forces opposing brahminism under its banner and agenda. It identified caste enemies, their political support and their financial clout and showed that only a conscious struggle against those forces could secure dignity and freedom for dalits. It enunciated the principle that political power is built on the foundation of caste and called on dalits to use all the instruments available to them to fight it. Having grasped that Karamachedu-like forces existed in every village, it organized resistance movements with the village as a unit. The matriarchal roots of dalit society made dalit women active partners in this movement. Dalit youth, suppressed by casteist forces, were organized. The movement aroused in them their dormant democratic spirit. It provided them with a flag and formulated effective slogans. It identified the caste element in every case of atrocity and challenged the offenders. It exposed the inadequacies of various laws and exhorted dalits to fight for their rights. It engendered a serious debate among the cadres of various splinter groups of the Communist party, who were waging armed struggle against the government, regarding the need to incorporate caste annihilation into armed struggle. It put the spotlight on the caste background of the followers and leaders of the armed struggle. It demanded that leadership be transferred to dalits working in those movements. It forced dalit leaders, who once regarded caste as irrelevant to armed struggle, to retract their stand. It forced people, who once claimed that the philosophy of the annihilation of caste was in itself a narrow casteist one, to discuss the issue on a societal level—proving that annihilation was the only alternative to the centuries-old brahminical philosophy. By placing the merits of Ambedkarism vis-à-vis brahminism in the context of historical, dialectical contradictions, it was able to carry the people with it.

Chronology of Karamchedu Movement

17 July 1985: The massacre takes place

31 July 1985 – Andhra Bandh: A statewide bandh supported by the Congress party, leftist parties and peoples' organizations was observed to force the government to pay attention to the issue.

14 August 1985 – Chalo Assembly: 30,000 Dalits marched to the Legislative Assembly in Hyderabad in heavy rain and presented a Memorandum. MLAs who had been elected under the SC reservation system but had taken no interest in the Karamchedu massacre were described as asses. Donkeys were placed at the head of the procession to shame these MLAs.

Hunger strikes: A series of relay hunger strikes were conducted to protest against the indifferent attitude of the state government.

Fast unto death: Thella Judson and Laban of Karamchedu started a fast unto death, even though the injuries they had received in the attack had not yet healed. They demanded the arrest of the accused and the allotment of land for the rehabilitation of dalits.

Dalit Mahasabha, Chirala: The government remained deaf to the demands of the victims. Therefore a 'Chalo Chirala' call was given. People from far-flung villages responded to the call. Three hundred thousand dalits marched to Chirala. The Dalit Mahasabha convenor and United Action Committee convenor, Katti Padma Rao, presided over this historic meeting. He was also entrusted with planning and execution of future programmes of agitation and struggle. In recognition of the success of this meeting, Judson and Laban were persuaded to call off their fast unto death. The meeting also called for rail and road blockades (rail, rasta roko).

Rail, rasta roko: Dalits organized and made a huge success of this programme. The government went on the offensive. They combed village after village and arrested dalit leaders.

8 September 1985 – Arrests of victims and leaders: An important leader, Rajasekhar, along with 300 surviving victims of the Karamchedu massacre were arrested and put into Nellore District Jail.

Hunt for Katti Padma Rao: Police searched the houses of friends, relatives and followers of Katti Padma Rao in several villages. In the interests of guiding the movement, he evaded the police.

10 September 1985: The police arrested Koti James, who was organizing a relief camp for the victims. Many other activists were also arrested along with him. The government

set up police pickets in villages that provided support to the victims.

Cycle and foot rallies: A huge rally, with some people on cycles and others on foot, began in Chirala on 4 September and reached Vijayawada on 6 December. One hundred volunteers walked from Chirala to Tenali on the same day.

6 October 1985: Dalit Mahasabha organizes a meeting in Vijayawada: Several dalits, men and women, young and old, attended this meeting. The government, working at the bidding of the kamma oppressors, drove out the audience, injuring several people. This was clear proof of the caste colour of the ruling Telugu Desam Party.

6 October 1985 – Katti Padma Rao's arrest: The police arrived with an arrest warrant for Padma Rao while he was addressing the rally in Vijayawada. Padma Rao asked that the arrest be delayed until the end of the meeting. But they arrested him immediately and did not allow the meeting to take place.

Protest rallies: Several silent rallies were held to protest against the arrest of Padma Rao and the breaking up of the Dalit Mahasabha meeting.

13 October 1985 – Chalo Hyderabad: On the call given by the Dalit Mahasabha of Andhra Pradesh, the Dalit Mahasabha of India organized a massive rally in Hyderabad on 13 October. The rally warned that if Rajasekhar and Katti Padma Rao are not released by 20 October, and the rehabilitation programme not announced, dalits would be constrained to resort to direct action.

Around the same time, dalit women held a dharna in front of the residence of N.T. Rama Rao, the chief minister, demanding the release of their leaders.

Achievements

The continuous and prolonged agitations listed above resulted in both short-term and long-term results. The dalits demanded that S.R. Sankaran, IAS, whose commitment to the cause of the dalits was evident to them, be appointed nodal officer in charge of the relief and rehabilitation of Karamchedu victims. The government accepted this demand. In addition to Sri Sankaran, other dalit IAS officers, like Kaki Madhava Rao, T. Gopala Rao, B. Danam and K. Kamaleswara Rao also worked for this cause. As a result, the families of the deceased got cash grants of Rs 1 lakh each, and a job in a government office. Pucca houses were built for all the 430 dalit families in an area of forty-three acres. This is considered one of the biggest settlement colonies in Asia. The leaders of the movement appropriately named this colony Vijayanagara. Each family was given half an acre of land for cultivation. Eligible people from these families were given jobs.

The government also set up an industry to provide gainful employment for these families. In all, seventy people were given jobs. Over the next two decades, this colony produced doctors, engineers and others who have found employment.

Considering the importance of land to the self-respect and sustenance of dalits, the dalit movement sought and got land allotted to the families of the victims in villages that became targets of atrocities, like Chunduru in Guntur district, Pippara in West Godavari district and Thimma Samudram in Prakasam district. In Karamchedu, a private case was filed against the main accused, who had been acquitted by the trial court. But we won this case in the Supreme Court. The eight dalits who were killed in Chunduru were buried at the very site where they were killed and it was named Rakta Kshetram or Killing Fields. The upper castes objected to their burial in the middle of the village. But the leaders asserted that they are heroes and martyrs of the dalit community, and their tombs will be removed only if the tombs of Gandhi and Nehru are removed from Delhi.

Ten years before the Karamchedu incident, I initiated and propagated the rationalist movement. That helped me lead the Karamchedu movement. I also applied the human rights philosophy of Ambedkar to this movement. We rejected the idea that a dalit rights movement should be led by leftist parties and ran it under dalit leadership.

When the name of Chenchuramaiah, the brain behind the killings in Karamchedu, was not included by the local police, and later by the CBCID [Crime Branch, Criminal Investigation Department], which took up the investigation in the judicial enquiry, we realized that the Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) Act, 1955, would not adequately protect dalits in atrocity cases. We discussed this with P.S. Krishnan, IAS, a great champion of the dalit cause. Under his guidance, we met Ram Vilas Paswan, Buta Singh and some other dalit MPs and prepared a draft law for the protection of witnesses who depose in favour of dalit victims, and for stringent provisions for punishing the accused. We worked in Delhi for a whole year to bring in the 1989 SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act. This gave me immense satisfaction as a social activist. We cannot forget the invaluable help of Ram Vilas Paswan and V.P. Singh in bringing in this new Act. The new Act of 1989 helped us to frame our strategy when we had to handle the Chunduru atrocity. In Chunduru, we demanded jobs and houses in addition to agricultural land. We also asked for a special court in Chunduru village itself and an exclusive panchayat for the dalits there. We mobilized 107 SC/ST MPs, and met the then prime minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, three times. We also met G. Venkataswamy, Buta Singh and Ram Vilas Paswan to lobby for this package in Chunduru.

Bojja Tharakam was president of Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha from 1985 to 1989. He was succeeded by Devarapalli Masthan Rao from 1989 to 2009 and they played stellar roles in the dalit movement. Continuous police harassment, living in jails and resignation from my teaching job badly affected my health, which had began to

deteriorate by the age of forty. The immense love and care of my dalit brethren were a source of relief to me during sickness. Many selfless cadres emerged during these struggles. The affection and unity that many activists bear me, at the national level as well, continues to this day.

When the then President of India, R. Venkataraman, refused to meet the 107 dalit MPs in connection with the Chunduru incident, the dalit leaders castigated him as casteist. Their stand was vindicated when a tall dalit leader, K.R. Narayanan, became the President of India in 1997. The movement invited national dalit leaders, like Ram Vilas Paswan, Ramdas Atale, Arun Kamble, Elumalai and Joginder Kavade to address meetings in Andhra Pradesh and raised dalit consciousness at the national level. It provided a strong platform for the Bahujan Samaj Party led by Kanshi Ram. It propagated the political empowerment agenda by working for a united action by SC, ST, BC and the minorities. It actively supported the Mandal Commission's recommendation for reservation for BCs. It adopted Mahatma Phule as the first champion of the dalits' cause and as Ambedkar's guru.

Truly, Ambedkar's philosophy is the source and inspiration for the dalit movement.

P. Muthaiah

When we interviewed him in 2011, Professor Muthaiah was director, Academic Staff College, Osmania University. What took us to him, however, is his standing as a public intellectual and his scholarly contributions to the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti's (MRPS's) demand for sub-categorization within the scheduled castes category to make recruitments more equitable.

The MRPS proposal to create four categories, which was widely recognized as original and designed to provide justice for all SCs in recruitment, was based on Muthaiah's Ph.D thesis. Doing that Ph.D was a challenge, Muthaiah told us: 'Supervisors tended to have landlord mentalities and there was limited scope in the social sciences for creative work.' In the late 1980s, Muthaiah had been attending meetings of the Arundathiyar Bandhu Seva Mandali (ABSM), a pioneering madiga organization, indeed the first organization to demand categorization within SCs. He felt he could do something for the cause.

Since caste data was no longer gathered, he had to turn to the past for his data. 'I studied J.J. Hutton's report, which was based on the Census of 1931, and the Ethnographic Notes in the Census of 1961. Based on these, I developed the categorization proposals using nine principles.' The dissertation, submitted in 1993, and titled 'Reservation and Recruitment: A Study with Special Reference to SCs in AP', provided the data for his 1994 categorization proposals. Though it began with radical ambitions, over the years the ABSM had been reduced to holding annual meets with cultural shows and arranging marriages. In 1993, they held a South India-level meeting, followed by the huge and historic meeting in Nellore in 1994, which was attended by over two lakh people who wanted to be part of the categorization discussion. A pamphlet with the statistics and the proposals was released and then distributed throughout Andhra Pradesh. Muthaiah was closely involved in the discussions and organizational work that led to the formation of the MRPS in July that year, presenting his idea and the proposals to various small and large groups—including once, in Kandukur in Prakasam district, to a crowd of 10,000. Muthaiah also presented his data and the proposals to the Justice Ramachandra Raju (Retd) Commission (1996). After submitting his report, Justice Raju congratulated Muthaiah on the fair-mindedness with which his proposals had addressed *all* castes that had not received proportional advantage of government benefits and not just his own madiga

caste. These data and proposals were also the basis of the 2008 Justice Usha Mehra Commission's proposals. In 1995, Muthaiah became chairman of the Madiga Intellectual Forum.

In 1996, in the context of this work, a Solidarity Committee consisting of intellectuals and activists was formed. Around forty organizations participated in this Committee under the leadership of the people's poet and singer Gaddar**.** As an active member of the Committee, Muthaiah spoke at a number of their meetings. Over 10,000 copies of a pamphlet carrying the ABCD proposals were distributed. But Muthaiah feels that he was gradually marginalized in the MRPS. 'They used me to talk to the CM [chief minister], or to MLAs [members of legislative assembly], but kept me out of public meetings—where intellectuals did not seem welcome,' he observes.

However, he quickly adds, 'There is no doubt that the movement was important. People used to hide their caste, but today they say with a certain pride: "I am madiga." Today it is respectable to be madiga. Also, a new consciousness has been put into place about reservations. Categorization was actually implemented for four years [1 April 2000 to 5 November 2004] before it was put on hold as a result of a case filed in the Supreme Court challenging the constitutional propriety of the action. But to really get a sense of the impact, we need to do case studies of institutions. For example, the safai karamcharis told Krupakar Madiga: "The justice we did not get for 400 years, we received in four years."'

Asked to speak a little about his own life, Muthaiah responds: 'I did think of writing an autobiography once. Some incidents came immediately to mind but I thought that before I start writing, I should read some other autobiographies. I read half a dozen or so and was not satisfied with any of them. They read like fiction. An autobiography, I felt, should not read like a novel. Readers should feel we are writing about reality. But the reading helped me remember my own life. I jotted down 100 points and wrote a thirty-page synopsis. I had thought of a title too—*My Experiments with Caste*—and even had a chapter plan. The first chapter would deal with my early life, ideas about women, marriage; a second would cover my experience at work, beginning from the day I joined Osmania University to the day I was considered for the vice chancellor's job.'

Professor Muthaiah was born in 1955 in Sublaid in Khammam district. His parents Venkaiah and Yellamma had seven children: three girls and four boys. He was the youngest. His father was a cobbler and their main source of sustenance was this traditional occupation; his brothers worked as jeeta-gallu (labourers attached to specific farms), his sisters as daily wage labour. They owned about half an acre of inam [assigned by the Nizams, for services rendered to the rulers or to the community] land.

Muthaiah was the only one in the family to get an education. He tells the story of how that happened: 'My paternal uncle's son used to go to school. "Your younger brother

goes to school," Father said one day. "Why don't you also go?" I did not say anything. The next day, he appeared with a slate and I heard him say to Mother: "Three of our boys are labourers, let us send this chap to school." I was eight. I still remember the day. I had no proper clothes. I wore a banian and pancha [loose shorts fastened at the waist with a drawstring]. That was 1961. It was already some seven or eight months into the school year. The Government of Andhra Pradesh wanted to implement compulsory primary education. The school peon used to come to the madiga wada, collect a few children and take them along. So two reasons came together: a government reason and my father's reason,' he says with a chuckle. 'I studied at the Government High School in Sublaid until the tenth class. In class, the mala–madiga boys sat in a row at the back, separate from the other children. There were three madiga boys. I had to sit between the mala boys and a dakkali. The mala boys wanted me to move away from them; the dakkali did not want me near him!' Gogu Shyamala's story, 'Madiga Badeyya', is based on Muthaiah's experience.

Muthaiah recounts how he became something of a hero in the school. One of the boys from the goldsmith caste used to be a nuisance—teasing the girls and the SCs. One day he threw a stone at one of the girls.

'Don't do that!' Muthaiah warned.

The other boy looked back at him threateningly: 'Meet me outside, after school,' he said.

'No,' Muthaiah responded. 'We will meet here.'

The boy rose to his feet. Muthaiah kicked him. He fell, cutting his lip. 'Everyone gathered around. I became a hero.' Later, when school elections came up, he contested against the same boy for the post of games secretary and won. The girls had all voted for Muthaiah!

For his intermediate, Muthaiah went to Suryapet. He wanted to do science and had actually filled up the application form when one of his seniors pointed out that science required expensive record books. 'So I cancelled that application and joined the commerce stream. I really regretted that later.' He passed his BA in 1978 and, in 1980, joined Osmania University for an MA in Political Science.

Financially, life was very tough. One of his elder sisters provided a little support; for the rest, he had to borrow from caste elders and return the money if and when he received his scholarship. 'Personal struggles drew me into political movements,' he observes. 'At every stage of my education, I had to fight against the upper castes both within the classroom and outside.' During his intermediate, he was drawn to the rationalists. The principal of his college, Mr Khanaji, was a member of their organization and he introduced Muthaiah to their writings: 'My horizons widened.' He

used to receive *Swetcha*, the fortnightly journal of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, at home and read it. This was his introduction to Marxism. From the time he was at school, Muthaiah was the leader of the SC/ST organizations in their hostels. He was also president of the junior and degree college hostels. However, an attempt to contest college elections landed him in trouble. 'There was a clash between the AISF union [affiliated with CPI] and the PDSU [affiliated with the CPI (ML)] and I got dragged into it without meaning to. A case was registered against me and seventeen others under IPC 160 [a fight, quarrel, or disturbance in a public place] for beating up an AISF person. We had to report at the Huzurnagar court twice a week for almost two years. That was 1973–74. This really slowed down my studies, but left me keener than ever to study.'

Joining Osmania University for his postgraduate studies was an honour and a rare opportunity. 'I studied hard, wanting a good degree. In those days, a first class was rare, but I got one. However, we had some teachers with a "landlord" mentality who always marked us down. They could not stomach the idea of a madiga getting first class marks.' In 1983, he got a job as lecturer in the Department of Political Science, Osmania University.

His teaching career began with a posting in the university's Women's College. On the very second day, a group of students decided to boycott the class saying that his teaching was not good. But a day or so later, a group of students approached him, saying, 'Sir, we are coming to your class. Forget about the others.' Both groups were led by brahmin girls. 'One should avoid generalizing too quickly about caste,' he warns. 'Our generalizations should be scientific, and not driven by prejudice.' He tells another story about a girl who whistled every time he entered the class. One day he confronted her and asked why she did that. She replied: 'Sir, when you were in college, did you not do such things?'

Muthaiah continues to be involved in categorization discussions. The article translated here, 'SC la lo Vargeekarana Yenduku?', was written in 2007 and published as a booklet. His other publications include: *Educational Development of Scheduled Castes* (2004), the edited collection, *Social Movements in India* (2006), and *Knowledge and Knowledge Society* (2010).

Why Categorization of SC Reservations?

Translated by Rama Melkote

For the last twenty-five years, the madigas have been carrying on a struggle for separate reservations. If the fruits of reservations have to be equally distributed among the fifty-nine scheduled castes in the state, the only way is to categorize them into ABCD. With the establishment of the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti in 1994, the demand for categorization entered a stage of active political struggle. Under the leadership of Manda Krishna Madiga, the movement received people's support. Today, in 2007, the madiga movement is moving forward, demanding that subcategorization be made legal through an amendment of the Constitution. Chief Minister Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy gave an assurance that he would legalize subcategorization through a constitutional amendment in Parliament in the same year. However, the Mala Mahanadu raised several arguments opposing subcategorization.

We are placing before you arguments that challenge the Mala Mahanadu stand, point to the great benefits that will accrue to the fifty-seven sub-castes (other than mala and madiga) among the SCs and demonstrate the need for subcategorization.

The chaturvarna hierarchy is based on notions such as purity, pollution, low and high. It is on these values that the fifty-nine dalit sub-castes are divided too, building a hierarchical society among dalits too. The malas and madigas have long been divided on the basis of specific features of dalit hierarchical society. Traditional professions, restrictions on inter-caste marriages and on eating together, separate dwellings and separate wells, separate temples and so on mark the division. It is these hierarchies that have denied a rightful share of reservations and their benefits to dalit castes such as madiga, relli or mehtar. By the 1980s, the madiga movement had gained strength as a result of a feeling of resentment resulting from inequalities and differential benefits of reservation. No one divided a unified dalit movement. The inequality among castes in benefiting from reservations is the main cause for the categorization movement. To expose and counter this inequality, we needed to focus on identity, and that is why caste-based organizations emerged. We need to recognize this as a natural and democratic outcome.

According to the 2001 census, in Andhra Pradesh, the population of scheduled castes was 12,338,400. What is identified thus as scheduled castes is not a single caste. It consists of many castes. The Justice Ramachandra Raju Commission categorized the fifty-nine scheduled castes into four groups, keeping in view the benefits due to them. On the basis of their socioeconomic lives, they have been identified as relli, madiga, mala and adi-andhra groups. Untouchability exists among these castes as well. Madigas are untouchables for malas. In fact, madigas are untouchables among untouchables and dalits among dalits.

A) The first group is relli and its allied castes. Their population is 206,053 (1.67 per cent). Traditionally, relli and mehtar castes are involved in cleaning toilets and the selling of fruits and vegetables.

B) The second one is madiga and allied castes. They number 5,915,028 (47.94 per cent). Their profession is to cure leather and make things with them. They also play the dappu.

C) The third one is mala and allied castes. They number is 5,111,799 (41.43 per cent). Their traditional professions are agriculture, farm labour, gram seva, protecting lake water.

D) The fourth is adi-andhra and allied castes. They number 1,105,520 (8.96 per cent). Mala and madiga who progressed and are now better off call themselves adi-andhra. They do not like to be referred to as mala or madiga. Among them, approximately 60 per cent are mala and 40 per cent madiga. They have joined the educational field in big numbers, and constitute second- and third-generation [government] employees and are educated.

From very early on, some mala leaders have been opposing the idea of equal share and respect to madiga. Resenting this attitude, the Arundathiyar Mahasabha was established in 1931 in the capital city of Hyderabad to promote madiga welfare. Casteism among dalits led to the formation of Arundathiyar Mahasabha. Although Bhagya Reddy Varma, B.S. Venkat Rao and Arige Ramaswamy were known as the 'dalit triumvirate', it was the adi-andhra Bhagya Reddy Varma who was considered the leader. Arige Ramaswamy established the Arundathiyar Mahasabha for madiga welfare, in opposition to Bhagya Reddy Varma's partiality towards the mala. Bhagya Reddy Varma behaved in a manner that denied benefits to madigas. On three occasions this was exposed.

1. He opposed the marriage of a mala girl, who was rescued from the devadasi system, with a madiga boy. Although Arige Ramaswamy was a mala, he did not show such partiality and got a madiga boy married to a mala girl. This must be appreciated. Bhagya Reddy Varma, who was then the leader of Adi Hindu Social Service League, expelled the mala leaders Arige Ramaswamy, Adayya and P.R. Venkataswamy from the mala caste when they attended a mala–madiga inter-caste wedding on the grounds that this went against mala tradition.
2. Bhagya Reddy Varma was against admitting madiga students to the thirty-four schools run by the Adi Hindu Social Service League. These schools were established with donations from patrons.

3. Bhagya Reddy Varma denied a share to madigas in the Adi Hindu Bhavan, built with donations from patrons, on the grounds that madigas did not contribute one paisa to its construction. Resenting this anti-madiga attitude of Bhagya Reddy Varma, the expelled mala leaders Arige Ramaswamy, P.R. Venkataswamy, Adayya and others established the Arundathiyar Mahasabha in 1931. (See P.R. Venkataswamy, *Our Struggle for Emancipation*, 1954.)

Today, some of the Mala Mahanadu leaders, following in the footsteps of Bhagya Reddy Varma, oppose equal share, equal respect and equal status to madigas. There is a great need today for leaders like Arige Ramaswamy, a mala, who established a separate organization for madigas and worked for their welfare. There is need for mala leaders to come forward to fulfil Ambedkar's goal and work for the welfare of dalits in an unbiased way.

The standards, framework and rationale that were formulated for the first time in 1931, by the then Census Commissioner of India, J.J. Hutton, towards the identification of SCs should be taken to their logical conclusion—that is, they should be extended to the categorization of sub-castes among the SCs. For the first time in 1931, the Hutton Commission acknowledged that the SCs were depressed classes in the context of the implementation of welfare programmes. The same list was accepted by the Government of India in 1935. After Independence, the Indian government accepted the lists of castes identified as SCs by Hutton. The President of India promulgated the 'Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes Order 1950' based on Hutton's Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes lists. Hutton identified the depressed classes on the basis of norms related to the caste system. These are:

1. Does a caste/class obtain the services of brahmins or not?
2. Do water carriers, barbers, tailors, who serve the brahmins, extend these services to a caste/class or not?
3. Does a caste/class pollute the upper castes by touching them or not?
4. Do upper castes accept water from the hands of a caste/class or not?
5. Is the use of public transport, roads, wells, schools denied/prohibited to a caste/class or not?
6. Is entry into Hindu temples denied to a caste/class or not?
7. Is an individual from a caste/class equal to an upper-caste person? In case the person is educated, can the person receive the same respect as an upper-caste person?
8. Is a class/caste backward due to ignorance, lack of education and poverty or not?
9. Is a caste/class backward due to its hereditary profession/occupation or not?

The fact is that the Hutton Commission identified SCs on the basis of social, religious and professional/occupational backwardness. That is, SCs were identified on the basis of customs and practices resulting from untouchability. The same customs that are practised against the dalits by the upper castes are being practised by the mala against the madiga. This is why the same principles that were first used by Hutton to identify SCs must be carried forward to its logical end to implement subcategorization. These very same principles were recognized in Article 14 of the Indian Constitution as rational principles for categorization.

The fifty-nine SC sub-castes are not in a position to benefit from reservation in an even manner as these castes have already acquired unequal positions within the dalit caste hierarchy. The percentage of malas in the total SC population is 41.43. However, the malas have captured 72 to 80 per cent of the benefits of reservation; and it would be fair to say that they have a hegemony in the field of reservation. Among the rest, the adiandhra sub-caste has won the maximum benefits of reservation compared to other sub-castes. As a result, the relli, mehtar and madiga castes have suffered injustice and remained backward. The madigas constitute 49.61 per cent of the total population of SCs and yet have remained at the lower rungs of employment and do not receive educational or employment opportunities proportionate to their numbers in the total SC population. That the benefits of reservation should be cornered by two castes is against the principles of social justice propounded by Dr Ambedkar. These inequalities, moreover, are a mockery of the concept of social justice as envisaged by him.

The Lokur Committee appointed by the Indian government at a national level also acknowledged that malas were one step ahead of madigas even a decade after the implementation of the Constitution. In 1965, the government appointed the B.N. Lokur Committee for verification of the scheduled castes lists. The committee identified the sub-castes that had appropriated the lion's share of the benefits of reservations and recommended that twenty-eight such sub-castes should be deleted from the SC lists. These are chamars in North India, jats in Madhya Pradesh, mahars in Maharashtra and malas in Andhra Pradesh. However, the madigas in Andhra Pradesh opposed the removal of malas from SC lists out of a sense of brotherhood because malas too are subjected to untouchability, just as madigas are.

In 1988, the National Commission for SCs and STs recommended that special protection must be provided for the weak among the weaker sections, and that the lists of SCs and STs must be prepared with a new critical perspective. For equitable distribution of benefits, special attention must be given to the method of scheduling. The following are the recommendations made by the Commission in this context.

1. While some caste groups that are included in the SC and ST lists do not even enjoy minimum benefits, other castes capture maximum benefits of reservation every year.
2. The first generation that is struggling for benefits of reservations finds it hard to step into this field. It is time now to look again at the issue of reservations from all angles. There is need to re-examine reservation policy to enable and extend opportunities to the backward castes among SCs and STs.
3. Unable to compete with the more advanced sections, the backward sections among SCs and STs suffer marginalization and subjugation. In this context, there is a need to critically re-examine the methodology of preparing SC/ST lists in order to abolish unequal competition. (*Report of Commission for Scheduled Castes and Tribes*, 1988, pp. 42 and 43).

In view of these recommendations of the Commission, there is a need to study how subcategorization lists can be prepared in Andhra Pradesh. The Justice Ramachandra Raju Commission formulated a subcategorization policy. The following are the principles propounded:

a) Indian society remains divided into touchable and untouchable communities. The panchama is untouchable across the country. It is on this principle of untouchability that malas and madigas in Andhra Pradesh are divided into touchable and untouchable. In other words, malas and madigas are divided on the ideological basis of untouchability.

b) A number of castes are subsumed under the mala and madiga categories in the state. In the madiga, these would be: gudem, baindla, sindhu, mashti; and in the mala: palli, mala ayyavaru, maladasari, mala mastu. The baindla for the madigas, and the mala dasari and mala ayyavar for malas, function as pujaris. These people share their joys and sorrows equally. On the basis of their way of life and livelihoods, the protégés of malas and madigas can be divided into two groups and the percentage of reservation benefits can thus be decided.

c) The equal status principle: Some castes have equal status although they live in different regions of the country. Despite migrating to other parts, they have equal status. The mangs of Maharashtra have equal status with madigas in Andhra Pradesh. Such castes, whose equal status in the social hierarchy has been established, are identified as one.

d) The principle of common name: Some castes have a common name within a clan. These castes have the same history, same god, same name. Such castes with equal

status can be classified as a single caste cluster. For example, madiga mashti and mala mashti.

e) Equality principle in traditional professions: In India, traditional professions determine a caste's status in hierarchical society. The varnadharma has attributed a profession to each caste. Pandits who perform religious rituals have also attributed hierarchical status to professions on the basis of purity and pollution. It is these traditional professions that have determined the status of malas and madigas. Cleaning of leather and making goods with it have a lower status and counts as an inferior profession. Agriculture and gram seva are considered superior to working with hides. Mala–madiga professions can be identified on the basis of these rules.

f) Reservation benefits can be determined on the basis of the proportion of the group in the population. The percentage of reservation that a group is entitled to must be determined on the basis of the principle that no single caste should monopolize benefits in any field. No one group should deny benefits to another group. Likewise, the policy must ensure that the weaker sub-caste in every caste group receives at least the minimum benefits. In the process of subcategorization, special attention should be given to ensure that the castes that have not been represented at all are the first recipients of benefits. Further grading should be done as follows: those who have not been represented at all, those who have not been represented sufficiently, and those who have not benefited at all.

The madiga movement for separate reservation is now twenty-five years old. In 1980, the foundation for the movement for separate reservation was laid by those madigas who were conscientized by the identification of ninety-three separate backward castes in the year 1970. In 1982, for the first time, Madhava Rao, son of Mudigonda Lakshmaiah, suffixed 'Madiga' to his name to become Madhava Rao Madiga. The Andhra Pradesh Madiga Sangham was established under the leadership of Dr B. Vidya Kumar. A bold movement demanding separate reservation for madigas reached a militant stage when pamphlets were thrown from the visitors' gallery into the Assembly while it was in session. The twelve activists of the Madiga Sangham who did this were sentenced to imprisonment on the grounds that they violated the rules of the Assembly. They were in the Musheerabad jail for nearly a month. All of this reflects the strong desire of madigas for separate reservations and the long history of the movement.

In response to the demands of Andhra Pradesh Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti, the then state government appointed a commission under the chairmanship of Justice P. Ramachandra Raju. The commission gathered sufficient information from different areas and departments. It realized that some castes enjoy very little benefit, while others

derive the maximum advantage. It also acknowledged that the mala and adi-andhra castes enjoyed benefits of reservation disproportionate to their numbers, leading to new inequalities. Having established that the madiga, relli and mehtar castes have missed out on these opportunities and continue to remain backward, the commission took the decision to correct these inequalities by rationalizing the reservation policy. This was the only way to achieve the goal of social justice, it felt. The Ramachandra Raju Commission based its recommendations on Hutton's principles.

Inequalities of Joint Reservations and Equality with Subcategorization

While common reservations create inequalities, subcategorization creates equal opportunities. Subcategorization is the best way to ensure the equitable distribution of the benefits of reservation. This truth is revealed when we compare the common reservation list of a particular academic year with that of the subcategorized list of an academic year after its implementation. The table here clearly establishes this fact.

Table Showing Inequality with and without Classification

Name	Castes	Group (A) Relli	Group (B) Madiga	Group (C) Mala	Group (D) Adi-andhra	Total
Medicine in all universities	Without classification	0	82 (16.87%)	345 (70.98%)	59 (12.13%)	486
	With classification	32 (6.58%)	227 (46.7%)	195 (40.12%)	32 (6.58%)	486 (100%)
Engineering in two universities	Without classification	0	70 (28.11%)	163 (65.46%)	16 (6.43%)	
	With classification	16 (6.43 %)	117 (46.98%)	100 (40.16%)	16 (6.43%)	249 (100%)
MSc courses in three universities	Without classification	0	183 (36.30%)	314 (62.30%)	7 (1.4%)	
	With classification	33 (6.54%)	236 (46.82%)	202 (40.07%)	33 (6.54%)	504 (100%)

The table also establishes that the adi-andhra and malas have captured about 70–80 per cent of the reservations before subcategorization was implemented and enjoyed a monopoly. It is only through subcategorization that all sub-castes will get an equal share

of reservations. If there is no categorization of reservations, mehtar and madiga sub-castes will continue to be at a disadvantage. The table here clearly demonstrates that subcategorization is both a necessity and also adheres to the rationale of justice.

Full census calculations are not needed for the formulation of government policies. The data from a sample survey can also point to the social reality and information necessary for formulating policy. The Ramachandra Raju Commission collected sufficient data from different departments. Now the Justice Usha Mehra Commission has also concurred that it is sufficient to gather sample data from every department, the Andhra Pradesh Public Service Commission and universities. If the government issues directives, it is possible to gather the information about educational and employment opportunities enjoyed by the sub-castes in just twenty-four hours. This data will prove that the weaker sections among the dalits suffer injustice due to the absence of subcategorization and affirm the imperative of subcategorization.

The rationale for formulating the subcategorization movement is the strong desire of the weaker sections to secure an equal share in the benefits of reservation. By 1980, madigas had been thrown out of leather-work. Machine-made rubber shoes entered the market and destroyed the traditional profession of the madigas. Those madiga girls and boys who completed their schooling and junior college education in villages remained unemployed. They realized that, in their villages, the malas were greater in number in the fields of education and employment, and therefore they too claimed their just share, proportionate to their numbers in the population. They proclaimed 'Dandora!' and started the movement anew. The Telugu Desam Party [TDP] and the Congress are manipulating the movement that was born out of a desire for equality to increase their vote bank. Only those who comprehend reality scientifically can understand that the madiga movement is *not* the creation of the TDP or the Congress.

The implementation of categorization in the state should be understood as a golden era in the history of dalit unity. This is because malas and madigas had begun to live happily together with the satisfaction that they will each get their share of the fruits of reservation. The inequalities created by reservation, which led to jealousies and misunderstandings between malas and madigas, were buried. Hence, the period when subcategorized reservation (1 April 2000 to 5 November 2004) was implemented was a golden era in the history of this state's dalit movement. However, the Mala Mahanadu opposed categorization with a selfish motive; it questioned sub-categorization in the Supreme Court and got it cancelled on procedural grounds, thus heralding a dark era in the dalit movement. Had the common list prevailed, it would have divided malas and madigas, and allowed the fire to burn endlessly like Ravana's funeral pyre.

Placing the fifty-nine SC communities in the state in four groups is a step forward in the journey towards dalit unity. It is not at all a division of dalits. It is an instrument for

equal distribution of reservation benefits, developed scientifically, and a step towards social justice.

The Justice Ramachandra Raju Commission designed categorization on the principle that the lowest caste should be given first priority. Consequently, the lowest sub-castes in the ladder of dalit hierarchy—relli and mehtar—have been included in group 'A'. Likewise, madigas have been categorized as group 'B', malas as group 'C', adi-andhras as group 'D'.

Acting on the commission's recommendations, the state government passed the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Castes (Rationalization of Reservation) Act, 2000 and announced the categorization of SCs into ABCD. However, the Supreme Court struck down the Act and decreed that, according Articles 15 (4) and 16 (4) of the Constitution, it was not within the purview of the state government to subcategorize in the implementation of reservation in education and employment, and therefore it was unconstitutional. According to Article 341 of the Indian Constitution, the President alone has power to identify and list scheduled castes and further that the President can declare the lists only in accordance with laws passed by Parliament. The categorization of scheduled castes as ABCD is not within the purview of the state government.

Since every state has a separate list of SCs, subcategorization should be possible at the state level. In the light of the judgment of the Supreme Court on categorization, social scientists and legal experts have indicated three alternative ways of proceeding:

1) To empower state governments to subcategorize the scheduled caste lists as proclaimed by the President, an additional clause should be added to Article 341.
2) The Presidential Order of 1950 on Scheduled Castes (particularly the Andhra Pradesh SC list in Part I) must be amended in Parliament and the subcategorized ABCD scheduled caste list must be inserted.
3) Categorization can be done by any other appropriate method. In view of the federal principle, the first one is the most appropriate. The second method is useful in view of local and state needs.

There is public support for categorization in Andhra Pradesh. This was made clear twice during the past seven years. In 2000, when the Telugu Desam was in power, and in 2005, during the Congress period, the state Assembly passed unanimous resolutions in support of categorization. These resolutions were facilitated by the presence of different political parties in the NDA [National Democratic Alliance] and UPA [United Progressive Alliance] coalitions. Among the parties that supported the idea, the Congress, BJP, TDP, CPI, CPM and TRS are significant.

There is a great need to take the principle of rational categorization, propounded in conformity with Article 14 of the Indian Constitution, to its logical conclusion. Article 14 of the Indian Constitution permits rational categorization for distribution of the benefits of reservation. It is in accordance with this principle that reservations were provided for SCs, STs, BCs, women and the physically challenged. BCs have also been categorized as ABCD according to this principle. In a historic judgment in the *Indra Sahani* vs *Union of India* case, the Supreme Court of India maintained that the categorization of backward castes into four (ABCD) is in conformity with the Constitution. It is categorization alone that will make the reservation policy flawless, establishing it as the best means for achieving social justice.

The founding fathers of the Indian Constitution chose reservation as the means of achieving the ideals of the Constitution: freedom, equality, fraternity and social justice. However, if the categorization policy to protect the weaker sections among SCs is not adopted, the very purpose of the reservation policy will be defeated, making a mockery of Ambedkar's concept of justice.

Sikhamani

‘I did never really experience caste discrimination, or the humiliation associated with it when I was growing up in Yanam [a town in the delta area of the Godavari which used to be a French colony].’ Speaking of his childhood, Sikhamani observes: ‘Everyone used to celebrate Buddha Jayanti and Ambedkar Jayanti, and there were really no tensions between the upper castes and SCs in my village. People were educated. We ate in each other’s houses and lived together in a friendly manner.’ When asked about how this unusual harmony came to be, he is initially lost for an answer, but then says, ‘Yanam used to be a French colony. After Independence, it was merged with the Union territory of Pondicherry. The influence of French thinking and the opportunities that came their way—many also migrated to Burma for work—made the dalit community relatively prosperous. Also as a Union territory, we have better access to facilities; for example, all SC/ST backlog posts were filled in the 1970s itself. Today almost all first-generation educated dalits have good jobs.’

Sikhamani is the pen name of Karri Sanjeeva Rao. He was born in 1956. His father, Suryanarayana, worked in Rangoon for several years before returning to India in the late 1940s, after World War II. He could speak five or six languages, including Hindi, Marathi, English and French. His letters home used to be written in English. Sikhamani’s mother died when he was a six-month-old baby; and his father, when he was studying for his intermediate. After that he was cared for by his father’s friend, G. Ratna Sikhamani. His pen name is his foster-father’s name.

He names his Telugu lecturer in junior college, Kandappa Venkata Narsamma, as an important influence. Noticing his involvement in cultural activities, and his keen interest in Telugu, she encouraged him. It was because of her influence that he took Telugu as a special subject for his BA. Since this option was not offered in Yanam, he applied to the PR Government College in Kakinada, where he secured admission. Kakinada was a centre of literary and cultural activity, and Sikhamani was able to meet critics and writers, among them Avantsa Somasundar, Aluri Vijaya Lakshmi and Chiranjeevini Kumari, in poetry-reading sessions and discussions. Some of his poems were published in *Andhra Jyothi* when he was still a BA student, he recalls. His teachers encouraged him to study further and he joined Andhra University for his MA. ‘It was Attaluri Narasimha Rao, one of my lecturers in Andhra University, who discovered, brought out and shaped the poet in me. In the last five minutes of every MA class of his, he used to

discuss music and poetry, read our poems and comment on them. I also had the opportunity to study with some of the legendary teachers of Andhra University, such as S.V. Joga Rao, Korlapati Sriramamurthy, Veturi Subramanya Sastri and Malayavasini.' He acquitted himself with distinction in his studies and gained an MA in 1983.

During these years, Sikhamani published poems in the magazine *Bharathi*, as well as in *Andhra Jyothi*, *Andhra Patrika*, *Abhyudaya* and *Praja Sahiti*. His first collection, *Muvvala Chetikarra* (The Walking Stick with Bells, 1987), was released in the university, which proudly showcased this book by one of its students. He dedicated this first book to his teacher, Narsamma. It won the Telugu University Award in 1989. A second collection, *Horugali* (Wild Wind), was published in 1988 and a third, *Chilakkoyya* (The Wooden Hanger), in 1993.

Turning to influences in his writing, Sikhamani says: 'I used to visit the poet Ismail's house in Kakinada regularly and I knew [Vegunta] Mohan Prasad through his writings. I was attracted to Ismail's school of poetry.' Perhaps it was because of this influence that critics began to write about Sikhamani as 'anubhooti kavi' (imagist poet). The important shift in his poetry, however, occurs later, in the 1980s, with the emergence of the dalit movement. 'Inspired by the dalit movement of the 1980s, I began writing about caste. My first dalit poem, "Vade Ashudda Manavudu" (That Fellow is the Unclean Human Being) was written in 1984. Jayaprabha, a feminist poet, criticized the language I had used in the poem. "How can a progressive poet use anti-woman language?" she asked. I answered that my real intention was to express the intense anger I felt about the fact that a human being was forced to eat his excreta.' After this, Sikhamani began writing poems responding to incidents of atrocities against dalits, on dalit agitations and different aspects of dalit life. Some of these poems were published in the 2000 collection, *Kirrucheppula Bhasa* (The Language of the Sandals That Make a Kirru-sound; madigas are especially skilled at making such sandals).

His friends and fellow poets from the upper castes, Datla Devadanam Raju, Madhunapantula Satyanarayana Raju and P.L.R. Swamy in Yanam, were upset by the new turn in his writing and its language. They responded with poems, which in essence said, 'We lived together with no feeling of caste in Yanam, we used to drink beer from the same glass, how could you write such poetry?' Sikhamani chooses to understand such responses as part of the general criticism of dalit literature itself. 'For instance, the Marxist critic Avantsa Somasundar, described dalit poetry as Christian terrorism. He was referring to Madduri Nagesh Babu's *Naraloka Prarthana* [A Prayer of this World]. The critic, Rama Brahmam, objected to dalit literature as it is critical of brahmins who have never attacked or abused dalits; and Ismail too called it a literature that crows had pulled into the gutter.'

Two more collections of poetry *Nallagetu Nandivardhanam* (The White Nandivardhanam Tree and the Black Gate) and *Tavvakam* (Digging) appeared in 2005 and 2009 respectively. Responding to a question about dalit poems in these collections, Sikhamani points out that there is no poem that can be picked out as dalit as such; in fact, he says, there is no such thing as dalit poetry; all the poems in the book are written from a dalit point of view. He cites many poems from these collections—especially those on black grain, his teacher, his aunt—to show that the dalit perspective does not sit on the surface of the poem, but emerges through the tone, the imagery, the subject matter, the passion. Commenting on the literary debates that opened up these questions in the 1990s, Sikhamani observes, 'Lakshmi Narasaiah's proposal that dalit literature is a literature written by SC, ST, BC and minorities led to a lot of critical discussion. With the intervention of Satish Chandar, the question of inside–outsider came to the fore. Karimulla advanced the idea of muslim vadam. Sunderraju and others established the Madiga Sahitya Vedika. A great deal of good literature came out of these new forums.'

Sikhamani is currently associate professor in Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, Hyderabad. He earned his first doctorate in 1991 from Andhra University for the study 'Prayogavaadi Pattabhi' (Experimentalism in Pattabhi's Poetry). His second Ph.D is in comparative literature—titled 'Telugu Marathi Dalit Poetry: A Comparative Study'—for which he was awarded a degree by the University of Hyderabad in 2007. In addition to the poetry collections mentioned earlier, he has several books of literary criticism, including *Dalit Sahitya Tatvam* (Theory of Dalit Literature, 1988), and a number of his poems have been translated into English, some of them collected in *The Black Rainbow* (2000). He received many awards, including Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University Award (1989), the Bulusu Seetharama Sastry Memorial Award, Rajahmundry (1991), Bhasha Puraskaram (2004) and the Dr B.R. Ambedkar International Literary Award (2009).

The poems chosen for translation here are among his best-received ones. A reader may find it useful to know that, in Andhra Pradesh, nurses are invariably dalit women. And they are rarely recognized or appreciated.

Pardon

Translated by Sarath Davala

Pardon me, dalit, pardon me.

I'm a brilliant poet, of classical hue.

Whoever I may be, wherever I hail from,
I have in my clutch the Apastamba sutras.[1]
My line is that of the select six thousand.[2]
Pardon me, dalit, in a thousand-year history
of poetry, drooling with sensuality and blinding devotion,
I could not write a word about you.

You have no qualities of a warrior-hero,
the guardians of aesthetics affirm.
A mala beauty can never be of Padmini's mould,
the laws of taste assert.
A shudra's poetry is corrupt, like sweets
defiled by the touch of a crow, Appakavi[3] declares.
How can I write poetry about you, tell me?
How can I bestow on you the honour
of being the subject of verse?

Pardon me, dalit.
I am a modern poet—if it comes to that, most modern.
I respect the law of honours and bow before awards.
This golden goose, my job, I fear to lose.
How can I write about you, tell me?

About heroic Vietnam, the Red Square,
Berlin wall, starvation in Somalia—
about those I can write.
But how can I write about
the suppurating sore of Chunduru,
the pounding pestles of Karamchedu,
the still-live fire of Neerukonda?
Global poet that I am,
How can I write about the mala street?

I, who once impatiently required
that others take a stand,
now, at this historical juncture
I stand, wavering.
I sang, full-throated,
of the martyrdom of revolutionaries.
But the severed corpses of dalits,
stuffed into sacks, and pushed into the
bullrush marsh, these bloated, desecrated bodies
have never stirred me.
I have sobbed and wept over racial hate, but by
this crime against humanity, I am unmoved.
The desolation of curfewed streets I could depict;
but never did I have even a mustard seed of feeling
for the easy slaughter of dalit people.
Over flower sellers, blind beggars,
I have crooned embellished words.
But no mention is made of the mauling
and burning in Padirikuppam!
I have wept nostalgic volumes over the village I left behind,
but could never question the distance
growing between person and person.

I fight for the neem tree—the right to it is of this land.
But the fight for the rights of fellow human beings,
I find difficult to endorse.
I come from a nation which, after its
low-caste vice-president has unveiled
a statue, cleanses it with ritual milk.

I believe that economic equality will bring social equality,
I also believe that class war can be won without annihilating caste.

I tilt my sword in the air, as in a dream.
Pardon me dalit.
To appreciate the real picture of this nation
I need another life.

Steel Nibs are Sprouting …

Translated by Kiranmayi Indraganti

My suspicion started
when the anyam household
raised their brass tumbler in a different way
to pour water into my cupped palms
during my high school days.

Then, when, as we fought at play,
someone called me
'mala bastard',
the suspicion smarted
with a grazed knee and heart.

When Mr Chayanulu wondered
during an interview
why a *reservation* fellow
should sport a *foreign* shirt,
Pilot pen and *Bata* shoes,
my suspicion grew bigger.

When in literary discussions
my two brahmin friends found
my language inept—

my suspicion came home to stay.

As a boy, when
in my grandmother's village at festival time,
I bought tidbits from the nearby street,
and the boys in the neighbourhood
laughed at me for eating
madiga food,
there was a plot, I realized,
to sever me not just from other castes,
but also from my own people.

'Is *Sikhamani* SC?
I mistook him for OC[4]—
judging by his poetic sensibility.'
This distinguished person's
thoughtless compliment
hardens my suspicion.
I cringe at his confidence that only
a certain caste can write poetry.
Open grounds to answer nature's calls,
cremation grounds to burn the dead—
these must lie outside living spaces.
But how has my house been pushed out there?
I want an answer now.

Not only my house,
my cremation grounds are separate too,
and this nation resembles a Hindu funeral place.
A distance has been inserted between me and nature's gift, water.
I want the whereabouts of these monsters, now.
We have been shown dirty ponds

for committing the sin of asking for water.
For the sin of asking water
We have been shown dirty ponds.
With a parched tongue, I am ready to take my revenge.

You tied palm fronds to our waists as to a donkey's tail,
to erase our footprints as we walked. Remember, these
our footprints have turned hard like steel.
You tied earthen pots beneath our mouths to catch our spit.
The day we hurl them away, in the current that will rise
you cannot but be washed away.
For the lesson you never taught, you demanded our thumbs as gifts.
From the stubs of those thumbs there now sprout nibs of steel
to write history anew.
Those who poured molten lead into our ears,
will need ladders to climb and pluck
the hair from our ear lobes.

The unjust law
that decreed our tongues be severed,
is only fit now to be a
dry, palm-leaf tongue scraper.

The sword that severed
Shambuka's head could remain
sharp and safe for centuries.
It has just changed hands
and no longer recognizes you.
No Manu to save you now!

Andhra—Land of Many Colours:[5] A Political Poem

Translated by Mohana Krishna Indraganti

On that thoroughfare, sometime ago,
when a six-foot cobra slithered across,
everyone made way,
bowing to the snake goddess.

On the same street, not so long ago,
when a stray dog wandered by,
dribbling saliva, its tongue hanging out,
tail between its legs,
people welcomed it as Bhairava
and sang songs of devotion.

In the very same lane earlier,
when a black pig had grunted its way through,
the crowd claimed it to be the Varaha incarnation
and fell repeatedly at its feet.

Once, years ago, a monkey had played hide-and-seek
on the peepal tree at the village centre.
Overjoyed, the devotees of Rama folded their hands
and hailed him as Hanuman.

In that very town, when a lazy bison,
with an arrogant hump, strutted along,
spiritual souls declared him Lord Nandi and
offered ecstatic obeisance.

Then, on a hillock close by,
A round black stone was sighted,

people said, ‘God has broken the earth and emerged.’
They prostrated before it and built temples there.

But when, on that very path,
people of flesh and blood tried to walk,
the whole town cried hoarse,
‘Madiga! Madiga!’
as if the earth was breaking up—
as if the sky was falling down—
as if the oceans were swallowing them—
as if the whole town was on fire—
and stopped them.

When humans turn beast,
injustice runs amok.
When humanity died,
Manu rose from the dead,
like a dinosaur reborn.

Come, my ‘untouchable’ friend,
let’s hammer into the heads of these
sons of Sankara that
it’s the filth in the heart that needs cleansing,
Not what is on the body.

Let’s bluntly tell them that
the arrow that cuts the sacred cow into two,
can also chop fanatics into pieces.

How can you forget our own Andhra,
and call Africa the Dark Continent!
How dare you call this jaundice-eyed country,
the Golden Land of Plenty?

The Lady with the Lamp

Translated by Kiranmayi Indraganti

Shh …
Her smiling face
signals you to be quieter
as you step inside the hospital.
As if she were the queen
of the kingdom of silence
against the throne of a wall.

An ocean of compassion, her eyes.
Kind breeze-like smiles dance on her lips.
She touches every wound;
every pain touches her.
She cares for each tear stain.
In the darkness of a hospital
she shines like the moon.
A lamp at the door,
she is awake when everybody sleeps,
Like an eyelid she guards each patient's sleep.

In the shadowy corridors,
she moves like a valiant mother
looking for her sons
in the battlefield.

In her white dress she moves
like a cotton field in bloom,
an angel descending

to annihilate death.

One in delirium, a woman in labour,
another in wakeful state of pain,
she reaches them all.

She leaves her worries behind,
leaves her baby at home
to attend on women in labour.
She pushes into her pocket
grateful smiles and tears of joy.

A wasted youth,
a rejected love
betrayed affections
have made her stronger.
She wipes away dirty looks
and offensive words as she disinfects
the tip of the syringe.

She becomes a broken thermometer
after a night's duty.
Removes her smile
and uniform to hang in corner.
She wraps around her the sari
of her inevitable worries.
She rests, covering eyes with her hand, and
snuggles like a dark shadow
beneath the lamp.

Digging

Translated by Mohana Krishna Indraganti

I asked my parents.
They replied with moist eyes,
'You are our Little Lord Krishna.'

I asked my wife.
With a sparkle in her eye, she said,
'You are my Man of Steel.'

I asked my children.
They answered:
'After Cartoon Network, you are the one
we love the most, Dad!'

One man said I was his friend.
Another called me his enemy.
Some called me an *andhraite*.
Some called me *dalit*.
Yet others called me *mala*.

Everyone is talking about the man they know,
but no one is talking about me.
Finally, I asked the one inside.
'Do you really want to know?'
he asked with a faint smile,
and slunk behind the curtain.

Thus began the digging.
Deep into myself.
Is it not possible that
someday I might find him?

M. Satish Chandar

Satish Chandar began his career as a lecturer, but is known today in very different avatars: as a poet, short-story writer, satirist, senior journalist, editor and founder of the AP College of Journalism. He was born in 1958 in Kommuchikkala, a village in West Godavari district to schoolteacher parents. His father, Gyanaprakasam, and mother, Satyavathamma, both worked at the Godavari Delta Mission School. 'Father had been taught English by an Englishman and was very particular about grammar. Mother was a popular teacher too. They mentored four generations of students from the village. I grew up in a religious atmosphere. My earliest exposure to literature was through the short stories in AIR's radio broadcasts. The radio was my window to the world.'

Coastal Andhra's home-based croquet lace-making industry ('Narsapur' lace) is located in the area Chandar hails from. It was begun by missionaries to provide work for Christian converts. The dalits were debarred from their traditional caste occupations after conversion. The lace products used to be sent as gifts to missionaries in the UK. 'It is an industry that gave rise to the first generation of dalit industrialists,' Satish Chandar observes. The villages in the area are also known for their involvement in the communist-inspired peasant struggles of the 1940s. A close childhood friend of Chandar's was the son of the local dalit leftist leader, Musalaiah. 'My father was religious, his was atheist, but we were close friends. It was in his house that I first saw a picture of [the important communist leader] Sundarayya in *Praja Shakti*, the party's weekly. Then he came to address a rally in a nearby town, Palakollu, around 1965–66. Excited, I went with the others in a truck to hear him. He was really small in stature and I remember being disappointed! But I memorized his speech; I could memorize speeches that impressed me. The communists' culture, their processions, their activities inspired me. I was also influenced by Uddamraju Ramam, a communist leader who not only distributed his land to dalits, but also conducted a land struggle in Kalipatnam, a village close to mine. He inspired me to take up these issues, as well as to read Marxist literature. As a result, when I went to college, I found myself easily moving into the leftist student groups.

'YN College in Narsapur boasts of many distinguished writers and artists among its alumni. The writers and film personalities Bapu, Dasari Narayana Rao and Chiranjeevi all studied there. The college literary club ran a magazine, *Chaitanya Sahiti*. It was a small handwritten journal and we brought out four or five copies. I helped with the

calligraphy and the illustrations. I also wrote short poems. We were friendly with the local VIRASAM members and also took up some social issues, such as the torture of women in police lock-ups. Another active member of *Chaitanya Sahiti* was T. Satyanarayana Raju. He introduced me to CPI (ML) ideology and gave me their political documents to read. One of the factors that attracted me to them is Vinod Mishra's awesome [English] prose. In fact, I translated his essay on Bhagat Singh into Telugu.'

Satish Chandar says that he first became conscious of caste as an issue that touched him personally only after he joined the Sir C.R. Reddy College in Eluru in 1978 for his MCom. Until then, he thought only in terms of class. Socially, there were two streams in the college: the SCs and the others. He wrote a few poems, which he recited to his classmates to much acclaim. 'I had only wanted to give vent to my anger, but I immediately discovered that I was speaking for many others.' One of his teachers also introduced him to the new discussions on gender. He read Ranganayakamma, Chalam and Kamala Das. 'The gender question has always been important for me,' he says. 'I try to deal with these issues as cautiously and thoughtfully as I can.'

In 1984, Satish Chandar took up a job as lecturer in BGBS Women's College, Narsapur. He also became a contributor to the new Telugu daily *Udayam*. 'I filed some controversial stories. By 1985, I had decided to change profession. I wrote a test for sub-editor/reporter in *Udayam* and later joined as sub-editor of the newspaper in Vijayawada. I was earning over 7,000 rupees a month as a lecturer and the pay here was only 650 rupees. I had two children. I had to live off my savings! I was soon moved to Rajahmundry, where I was a district reporter. There I connected with the Praja Pantha [New Democracy] party and other parties with leftist leanings. I would investigate something and write a story. They would follow it up, take up the issue and often also set up a union. But I was not formally part of their group; neither did I worry much about "mass line" or "military line"! In 1985, when the massacre took place at Karamchedu, I first analysed it through the lens of class.'

However, he soon began to feel that there was 'something beyond class, in which the dynamics were different', and began exploring it in his writing. From 1987 onwards, he was involved with the organization Chaitanya Vedika and its journal *Rachana*, and found himself turning increasingly to dalit issues. It was around this time that he discovered an early dalit hero, Dwarabandhala Chandraiah, who was a sort of predecessor to Alluri Sitaram Raju (leader of the 1922 Rampa Rebellion against the British). Chandraiah worked among the tribals in the agency area in East Godavari district and common people remember him. During this research, Satish Chandar also met some untouchable labourers who used to run in front of the landlord's bullock carts to clear the path. His first short story, 'Dari', was based on the experiences of these

labourers. Satish Chandar married outside his caste and against the wishes of his parents. Gowri had been a student of his and also active in the *Chaitanya Sahiti* group.

'My house had become a sort of literary meeting place. Ommi Ramesh Babu, Namadi Sridhar, J. Gowtham, K.N. Wesley and some others published a small bulletin of poetry called *Kanjira*. Some of my early poems were published there. I joined Prajarachayitala Samakhya (Prajarasa), which was established by Nammu, Jeeva and others. We developed some street plays—a couple of them on literary trends and wrote parodies of regressive writing.'

In 1991, 'when the killings took place in Chunduru, my response was quite different [from what it was after Karamchedu]. I was then special correspondent for *Suprabatham.* My wife, the photographer Viju and I went to the village. As is my practice, I went first to the upper castes and listened to their story. Only then did I go to the victims. This way, I get the full story from both sides. Chunduru is historical in many ways. In Karamchedu, the dalits fled the village after the attack; in Chunduru, it was the upper-caste perpetrators who left! I interacted with one elderly upper-caste man. He told me that there had never been any conflict in the village. "We were like father and children. The problem arose only when the railways came. The SCs found jobs as gangmen. Their children got educated. It all went to their heads. They grew adamant and began settling scores." So, you see, what a change is wrought with even a small economic boost. It gave them self-respect. This is why most atrocities have taken place in the coastal districts, where the missionaries were active and there is education—not in Telangana. The parents of one Chunduru boy who had been killed, brought out his photograph to show me. "Look how handsome he is; he never wore un-ironed clothes; never ate beef; insisted on mutton. He ate breakfast in the village tea shop along with the reddy children. That is the reason why he was killed." So, you see, you will be beheaded only if you hold your head high. But that is not all, you also see that the other side of self-respect is shame. The bodies were brought back and given a respectful burial there, in the centre of the village. The tombs were built of mud. In "Shishuvu Nedu Lechenu" [translated here], I write about the tombs as wombs from which Jesus will be born again, and compared the killings with the crucifixion of Christ. When I recited the poem in Chunduru, it was received with rapt attention. The metaphors made sense to them.'

Around 1988, Satish Chandar moved again to Vijayawada as chief reporter for *Andhra Bhoomi.* Two incidents that took place at the time are crucial to the poem 'Panchama Vedam' [translated here]. Dakkali Balaji, a student at Siddhartha Engineering College, was scolded and abused by the principal in the presence of many others. The motorcycle seat cover of one of the exam invigilators had been ripped and Balaji was blamed for it. He pleaded innocence, but it was of little use. He left college

and went back to his home in East Godavari. That night he wrote two letters: one to the principal and the other to fellow SC students in the college. He then walked out into the fields to his grandfather's tomb and consumed poison. 'He was the only son of his parents. The students came to me with the letters. I promised to carry the report in *Andhra Bhoomi*. When it appeared, the principal called a press conference and attacked me. Not a single person supported me,' Satish Chandar recalls. Around the same time, another boy immolated himself before the principal, who had abused him. He died six days later. 'I recited "Panchama Vedam" in Rajahmundry at the poetry-reading session held at the Godavari Pushkaralu. [This is an official poets' meet and is generally dominated by brahmin writers. That reading gave rise to many debates and controversies.] When Satyamurthy left People's War and floated *Ekalavya*, he carried the poem in the very first issue of this journal.

'K. Srinivas, literary critic and now the editor of *Andhra Jyothi*, collected some of my dalit poems and analysed them in *Udayam* in 1993. He placed me in the historical lineage of Gurajada Apparao, Jashuva, Varavara Rao, Tharakam and others who portrayed dalits from a progressive and revolutionary viewpoint in modern Telugu literature. He argued that I was the first modern poet to voice dalitvadam [dalit ideology] powerfully. This appreciation put me in a difficult situation. My fellow dalit poets wrote articles saying that I was claiming to be an adikavi and dalit Nannayya [Nannayya is regarded as the father of Telugu literature]. This is not true. *I* did not say all that. I was deeply hurt by all this. Especially because I was attacked by other dalits,' Satish Chandar explains.

Tripuraneni Srinivas included nine of Chandar's poems in a collection of dalit poetry, *Chikkanavutunna Pata* (1995). The foreword to the collection was written by G. Lakshmi Narasaiah who proposed that the ideology of the poetry in the collection could be considered 'Deseeya [Indigenous] Marxism'. Satish Chandar did not agree. He called Lakshmi Narasaiah's theory 'a pet theory' and wrote sarcastically about it. The intervention sparked off a dalit critical debate in Telugu.

'Actually I was really upset by the language used in the *Nishani* collection.[1] How can one use language that is abusive of women and call it dalit diction? Dalits have a contribution to make to the language of Telugu literature. Is dalit diction only this filthy language? This is the language thrust upon them, not one of their own making. If we are interested in democracy, it is important not to forget, and in fact to honour what the women's movement has achieved. If dalit women are the victims of the caste system, upper-caste women are its prisoners. Ambedkar wrote about this—pointing to sati, child marriage, the prohibition of widow remarriage, the fear that she might love/marry a low-caste man.

'I also want to say something about the poem "Dalita Prema Lekha" [translated here]. Suneetha was a student at Hyderabad Central University when she took her life. I read her suicide note. She was in love with another student, Yogeshwar Reddy, and they had been together for a while. She had had three abortions. Then he left her to marry someone of his own caste. She wrote: "In order to prove that a dalit woman can love, I take my life." To state a simple truth, she had to give her life as evidence. Most dalit poems about love are written by dalit men and are about them being ditched by upper-caste women. This was so different. There is a lot more to the dalit-women question and poets like Challapalli Swaroopa Rani are writing about it. Unlike upper-caste women, dalit women are seeking out the protection of family life. They are not focused on its inequality. For the upper-caste woman, the family is a cage. For the dalit woman, it is a shelter. One could write a book about dalit love.'

Responding to the charge that dalit literature lacks aesthetic quality, Satish Chandar said: 'Movements come like floods. They give rise to poetry, non-poetry—all kinds of writing. This happens in revolutionary literature as well. Dalit poetry is not an exception. There is a great deal of moaning, of passionate denunciation. Fortunately for us, we had the example of the Marathi poetry; we learnt from them—from how they handled questions of the aesthetic. There is also the challenge posed by the idea of the reader. Are one's readers dalits or non-dalits or both? What does it mean to write in a way that straddles both audiences? Personally, I tried to bring dalit poetry into the mainstream; to show that it is not inferior to the classics.'

About the Madiga Dandora movement and the demand for categorization, he has this to say, 'Definitely. We need to acknowledge and attend to the question of inequality within inequality. I was editor of *Vaarta* when the issue came up and I gave it good coverage. I support ABCD. But there are some differences in the way I understand the question. The issues are different in each of the regions. Madigas are the majority in Telangana; malas in coastal Andhra. Rayalseema has about equal numbers of both. Telangana dalits did not have the educational, social or economic advantages that coasta [coastal] people gained through colonialism. Coasta malas have more or less forgotten their "caste" occupations. Telangana madigas are largely still tied to their caste professions. In fact, my new book of poems *Aadiparvam* [2008] is all about such political power, the possibility of political coalition without diluting the identity of any partner, and so on.'

Satish Chandar's first book of poems, *Panchama Vedam* (The Fifth Veda) was published in 1995 and remains a widely acclaimed book. The poems translated here are all from this collection, which has also been prescribed for MA (Telugu literature) by Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, and has been translated into Kannada. Other collections of poetry are, *Nanna Cycle* (Dad's Bicycle, 1995), *Pasupu Jabilli* (Yellow

Moon, 2002) and *Aadiparvam* (Genesis, 2008). His books include the short-story collection, *Chandrahaasam* (The Smiling Moon, 2006), the satirical works *Made in India* (1992), *Itihaasam* (History as Farce, 1995) and a play *Dunkel's Bells* (2003). A collection of his editorials, *Mandal– Mandir*, was published in 2007. Satish Chandar has received many awards, which include the Artos Award (1995), Free Verse Front Award (1996) and the Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University Award (1998). He has also received the Kandukuri Veeresalingam Award for Objective Reporting (1987) and the Gajjala Malla Reddy Memorial Award (2001).

The short story 'Desamante Metukuloyi!' [literally, 'Nationalism means Food'] (translated here) was first published in 2010.

The Fifth Veda

Translated by C. Subba Rao

To the teachers
who failed me in life
by marking seventeen
out of hundred years,
with folded hands,
let me write,

'You cannot understand even if
you are dead.'
The math on fingers that you taught
while cursing me,
I could understand only
after death.
Whenever I counted, I could find only
four fingers on my hand.

Lacking the fifth finger father never

put his thumbprint on the progress report
which you marked full of zeroes.
Lacking that finger mother could not
feed me sweetmeats even on
a moonlit night.

Tell me the truth:
Does Panchama mean a fellow
lacking the fifth finger?

Ekalavya,
my great grandfather,
now revealed.

Excuse me,
for dying without paying the fee.
What shall I give?
I would give my life,
but sheltered in my body until now,
it is tainted.
Besides, you suffer from the pollution plague.
Okay, even if I were to give my sensitive mind,
the burden of my death will fall on you.
Either way it is proper to give
my scarecrow image to you;
it would protect you from the evil eye
when you chance to sit for a community meal
on some Gandhi Jayanti Day.

Ekalavya
in
Mahabharata
was also a scarecrow.

Remember me
to the Kauravas and Pandavas in my class.
Convey my sympathy
to Karna
who has joined the class
with a new caste certificate.
They are all meritorious people,
who clapped at your slokas.
As for myself,
they seem like curses.
To tell the truth,
the creed of Manu sounds like the Kamasutras,
the four mysteries of God's body
appear like pornographic pictures.
For not scripting in your treatises
the mystery of my birth,
I am ever grateful to you.

Whenever you couldn't find curses
in your dictionaries
to show me contempt
my mother-word was wet on your tongue.
At least in abuses you certified that
I am born to my mother.

Certainly we are children born to a mother.
Mother is our God.
Exiled by royalty, even if Kunti-amma
comes to our homes,
we would worship her as a goddess.

Ekalavya

was born, not to gods,
but to a mother.
Go tell the Press
it is not kerosene that scorched me,
but unvanquished self-esteem.
While burning in the fire
my own body smelt foul to me,
exactly like the stench of all you living.

Then I understood, mastaru,
the difference between you and me.
The stench of caste hits you even without burning.

Our people are saying:
Even if you are killed, it wouldn't be a sin.
But when were you really alive?
Mother would say,
The fellow who feasts on his own
funeral meal
is a corpse.

Whenever you laughed seeing me
I saw only a lipless grin of the skull.

Ekalavya, the hero,
would not kill the dead.
Finally, one word.
Convey my thanks to the Sakuni uncles[2]
who walked in my last journey.
I can see
their tearful tides brought floods to the village.

With make-up gone

their seeming sorrowful faces
reveal tiger stripes.
Their memorial speeches reek with
the musty smell of ballot boxes.
Even then, they have done a lot of good to me.
For my burning alive
they supplied kerosene on the ration card.

Ekalavya
would cremate them tomorrow
in the forest
free of cost and redeem my debt.

(Dedicated to the students Dakkali Balaji and
Dokka Padmanabha Rao, the victims of teachers' caste prejudice.)

The Child is Risen Today

Translated by C. Subba Rao

Why these hard rocks
obstructing the tombstones?
Let them pile up
mountains.
Suddenly as on Easter dawns
wouldn't Jesuses
spring up?

Why tombstones in the middle,
as though the village itself
is exiled?

A village has four corners,
beings four legs
four rows for rolling
caste crawling on four feet.

Somewhere in a distant fifth corner
the birth of the child with two feet
in a cattle shed.

Whether a star appeared or not,
already the thud of the broken tail
is heard
in the village.

Anger of cattle tainted by the touch of
the child's feet,
barking and howling and breast-beating.

This Child,
the very apple of the eye of slaves,
collective dream of a century,
the very first stanza of
a new vande mataram.

But for cattle-dharma minds
the birth of this child is a horrible sin.

Crime it is for the child
to have two feet.
They drive in nails that he may not tread on
surplus land.

Crime to have two hands.
They break them to prevent

begging for work.

Crime to have a mind in the head.
They fix a crown of thorns,
so he may not to write the Constitution
again and again.

Crime to have a radiant face.
Spat on it to prevent
any mother kissing it.

Above all crime to have a throbbing heart.
So they pierced it with spears.
What use love for the son of a slave?

Crucifixion of the child
in fertile fields;
darkness shrouding broad daylight.
Sky shattered into five fragments,
patching just four pieces.
The sun covered his shame with the fifth.

One last word spoken by the child on the cross
‘Father! These know for sure what they’re doing.
Let them survive until I rise again.’

Flight of village cattle.
In the meeting of four roads,
seeded womb of Mother Earth.
Cowards are these herdsmen!
Even before the child could rise,
they prohibited the slaughter of cattle.

‘To seek out and punish the cattle,

the child will walk the earth again.'

Bereft hearts of lamenting Mothers all
with cleansed eyes clad in white,
speak words of welcome:
'The child is risen today.'

Dalit Love Letter

Translated by C. Subba Rao

I am dying
Pardon me, my upper-caste lover.

Not in easy instalments,
mind at one time
body at another,
but like leaf and nut at one single moment
have I offered myself.
Drenching rain is my body.
Scorching lightning my mind.
Comforting warmth inside water
is my love.

I know not
your kind of romance—
delivering the body at the door
after tying three knots
on full payment.

Forbidding my lovely mother
to go out in the sun for wages,

cursing and crying to his heart's content,
when my father hugged her
I dropped into mother's womb.

My birth
was fashioned only
when two bodies became one mind.
A sanctity far beyond the reach of
a mere yellow thread
blooms between hunger-bound hearts.

Dying is our caste-creed.
That a flower blooms, a cock crows,
that a child cries,
all these for us are great things
like the earth being round.
We die to proclaim.

Often we must climb the Cross
to tell the truth
that we can use our tongue
that we can appreciate grace.

For example,
I am dying to proclaim
that wholehearted giving of the mind
that totally mindful offering of the body
is true love.

Dying to proclaim
that kiss is
a strange advaita,
its oneness mysterious,

wet and warm.

That embrace is
grafting two bodies to sprout
one and only life,
that I am dying to proclaim.
That in truth love
is courageously kicking the boat
in mid-journey;
drowning and rising and struggling
helping each other to reach the shore,
I am dying to proclaim

Dying not because
you prostrated before my ripened womb
like a cowardly emperor bowing his head
after condemning the criminal.

Know not whether you're
a yogi or a bhogi,
but old before your time
you salivated on the platter spread with food.
With the same hand that hit the stray dog,
I can as easily hurl the platter.

But all of a sudden
Death for me has become as important
as life itself.
A singular death has become inevitable.
To proclaim
that minds of Matangi maidens are utterly pure,
purer still than the bodies of Parvati and Lila.

Pardon, my upper-caste lover, pardon
I am unable to present my mind
bereft of the body.

Robbing one's own house,
prostituting one's own wife,
I know not about the village
but these are certainly unbecoming to
the outcaste street.

Love Thy Country[3]

Translated by D. Vasanta

I woke with a start.

That jump transported me from one life to another. I was still travelling in the same bus.

I opened my eyes. Two women boarded the bus as it came to a halt. They were the women in the dream that disturbed me a few minutes ago. One of them is dark-complexioned, the other fair.

The dark one laughed out loud. I heard it.

The fair one smiled softly. I saw it.

That is the way it is. We hear a noise and ignore it. But we watch the silence.

They remained near the front seats of the bus, standing. What a lot of chatter! The words are from the dark woman.

Silence belongs to the fair one.

Words have a history, silence yet another history.

These women had not changed. Memories dragged me back into the distant past while the bus moved forward …

Bumping …

I was with the dark woman at the railway station in Lankala-Koderu village. We talked from dawn to dusk … sad and funny words all mixed together.

A patient on the operating table, when given chloroform, is silent for three hours. I gave her a lie. It had an effect greater than that of chloroform. But I gave it to make her talk, not to remain silent.

'Sister! Your husband Vincent is coming by the morning train!'

'Really … ! Tell me the truth, Rajanna.' She always spoke to me like that.

I always told her the truth … rarely a lie. That is why this lie is going to have a powerful, intoxicating effect.

'Why is he coming three months in advance?'

'You know he has asthma. It got worse with the chill weather there. So, they gave him leave.'

These details made me feel like crying.

'But I am sure the heat here will make it less.'

'I will cook fried chicken and fish curry … his asthma-giisthma will just disappear.' As she said this, she wiped her eyes and nose with the end of her sari and pulled herself together.

The cock near the railway quarters began crowing, kokkoroo koo.

'You heard the cock crow, didn't you? What I said will surely come true.'

The wooden seat we were sitting on was under a banyan tree. The leaves began to whisper as if they were mocking at me.

I told this lie not to raise her hopes, but to chop it into small pieces like a leafcutter eats a leaf.

'Whatever you say, illness is illness,' I said firmly, in a voice that had no compassion whatsoever in it.

'That is true. He doesn't know the difference between day and night. Even when he was here he was like that—always on the move. Visiting his older sister in Moturu, the second sister in Singichchi … tell me, which village did he not visit? When home on vacation, he never stayed even with his wife for more than two days, the great military husband that he is! When did he stay at home? No wonder he is ill now. Anyway, he is coming—let him. I will break his legs if he steps out of my house,' she remarked emotionally.

A half-torn peepal leaf fell in my lap. Thank God, I had managed to loosen her hopes somewhat, I thought to myself.

'They did their best to help him in the military hospital there.'

'No, Rajanna, this illness cannot be cured with English medicines. There is a guy in Rajolu. He gives some leaf extract and I believe it makes any illness disappear at once.

Don't worry, I will take care of this! I know what to do if he doesn't cooperate. I will make him come around. When we first got married, you know what happened? Seeing his wayward ways, I scooted back to my home.

'"You stupid woman, how could you leave your husband and come running back here?" my mother had jumped on me, wielding a broom. People from the neighbourhood gathered and began watching the drama.

'"He sleeps through the day mother," I shouted. She threw the broom aside and started laughing loudly and everyone else joined her. How ashamed I felt!' she said, laughing out loud.

A ripe peepal leaf without a single hole in it fell on my forearm. I knew that the anaesthesia caused by my lies was wearing off. But I didn't give up.

'Oh, don't tell me that! You are blaming Vincent now, but we all know you used to run home every time you felt homesick.'

'That is true, Rajanna. That is why I said to your Vincent right at the beginning, "I will marry you only if my mother and father can live with us." He agreed,' she said with a sigh.

'What use was it? Within a month of coming, my mother had a stroke… one leg and an arm was paralysed.'

Good, it is better to divert her attention to her mother, I thought.

We heard the sound of an approaching train.

The darkness was yielding … dawn broke. People began coming out of their homes and gathering in small groups. The MLA came to the platform along with the MRO and the SI. The MLA's gunman held a garland of flowers in his hand.

'Rajanna! Do you think a minister is coming?'

'Someone bigger than a minister must be coming,' I replied

'Oho! The minister and a military fellow can travel by the same train,' she said with a pride-filled voice.

The train rolled in unabashedly, with no sign of compassion and with a violence that would shatter not just the darkness of that night, but all the lies I had been weaving.

Everyone moved towards the same bogie.

An officer in olive green uniform got off the train.

'Who is Geddam Krupa, wife of Geddam Vincent?' he asked.

I pushed the dark woman forward.

He removed his cap and bent forward respectfully and said, 'I am sorry, Sister!' By then, the coffin covered with the tricolour had been brought out of the train.

‘Amar rahe! Geddam Vincent amar rahe! Johar Geddam Vincent johar!’

The dark woman jumped towards me and snatched my shirt collar.

‘So, you got him leave, Rajanna, did you?’ she screamed. ‘They have truly sanctioned my husband leave!’

That scream frightened the birds on the peepal tree. They rose and flew away.

A moth-eaten leaf with only its skeletal remains fell on the coffin.

They opened the cover of the coffin.

Dark woman Krupa began talking.

The MLA said: ‘Amma, your husband is a hero. He fought the enemy on the border with Pakistan before losing his life. He is a darling child of this country. A great soldier who never turned his heel, Geddam Vincent amar hai.’ So saying, he placed the garland on the coffin and bowed, folding his hands together.

‘This is a lie. You didn’t die. Vincent can never die. There is no war! You have asthma and so you cannot take the cold there … I will warm you. I will give you all the heat from my heart, and you will return to the military. How can you not? Who will feed me? Who will buy Mother’s medicines?’ She looked all around like a woman who has gone mad.

‘Rajanna, why have they put him in that box as though he is dead? Come, help me. Let us make him stand up. I will take him to Rajolu and help him get better. I know he can walk … Come, Rajanna, come,’ she urged.

She talked on until they had buried her husband after marking his forehead with a cross. Then she fainted.

*

The bus stopped at many places. People alighted. Those who had been standing until then were now sitting in the vacated seats. But the two women never sat down, neither did they get off anywhere.

The bus moved onto a newly tarred road. It began running smoothly … a welcome break indeed on this bumpy road trip. When there is a lot of commotion, we always remember the silent moments, like the silence that has swallowed the words.

*

That fair woman was like that too. Her silence swallowed all our words.

‘Vaidehi, your husband is coming. Don’t cry. Do not drop a single tear. Salute him … like we salute a flag … with due respect,’ Raghupati Varma teacher requested his

daughter-in-law in front of all of us.

She conveyed her consent with her eyes. I could not look at those eyes that had swallowed their sorrow for more than half a second. It was easier to look at the kumkum dot that glowed like a morning sun on her forehead and that too, only for a moment or so. After that I felt it was better to stare at the colourful rangoli she was drawing in their front yard.

By then, our teacher appeared before us wearing a Glasgow dhoti, a khadi silk kurta and a shoulder piece with a green border … he looked clean and freshly bathed. He appeared before us just as he used to in class.

Whenever I couldn't follow the lesson he was teaching, I used to stare at him … that is why I feared and loved his looks.

That was how it was, not just for me, but for his own son, Chittu, as well.

'Orey, he doesn't behave like a father even at home … there too he is a teacher,' Chittu used to say affectionately, with a quiver in his voice. His name was Chittaranjan, we had shortened it to Chittu.

Raghupati Varma teacher never actually beat us, but he always made us feel as if he was going to. That is why we were so scared of him.

The history he narrated was magically related to our present reality … that is why we loved him.

I still remember Chittu's comment: 'I wish he would go ahead and beat us. Then we could stop being so afraid of him.'

Chittu liked Vaidehi … that is not news since everyone liked Vaidehi. But Vaidehi was interested in him. When he learnt that, she stopped appearing in Chittu's dreams.

'If I close my eyes, I can only see Glasgow dhoti, khadi silk kurta! I just cannot sleep,' he used to say.

'Why don't you just tell your father about Vaidehi, you can get it over within a day, then,' I said.

He went to his father, but do you know what he told him?

'Father, I want to join the Army.'

'Chittu, why did you say that?' we asked.

'I don't know, when I looked into his eyes, I just felt like saying something I know he would love to hear,' he replied.

That is how our Chittu became Major Chittaranjan and when he returned, our teacher himself declared: 'You and Vaidehi are to be married.' Our Chittu was elated, but his

face changed colour when his father continued: ‘My son who has no guts is getting a brave wife.’

Vaidehi, who was standing by, smiled with her eyes. I suppose she had revealed her feelings for Chittu to the teacher—something that Chittu himself never had the courage to do.

Although Chittu’s full-length photograph hung there, I couldn’t get myself to look at it; I kept staring at the dots in Vaidehi’s rangoli … so many dots and only a few lines joining them.

‘Raju, look! My son Major Chittaranjan is coming. I named him after our national leader, Chittaranjan Das. My son doesn’t have a weak heart. He is very brave. He killed nineteen terrorists before giving up his life. Even as he was battling for his life, I believe he killed the twentieth guy who was torturing him. Do you know what that means?’

To that question from our history teacher, not only I, but even Vaidehi, who had by then completed her rangoli, looked up with question marks on our faces.

Laughing, he answered his own question: ‘He killed his own death!’

Then a group of schoolchildren came marching down in a neat line, behind them a special gun-holding, flower-bedecked carriage with a casket covered in the tricolour … it all flowed towards master’s front yard like a silent stream.

‘Only brave hearts should see brave people. Vaidehi!’ he called out to his daughter-in-law.

She came and stood looking at the face in the open casket.

She saluted the body. Utter silence reigned. We could hear her heart beat—that kind of silence! Both of them swallowed their grief as if it was fire. I wonder who gave them that strength!

*

I alighted, not just from the bus, but also from the memories that had crowded my mind. The two women weren’t there … what remained was only the feeling that I had met them some ten years ago. It was dawn … the same sun was out throughout the day, but I felt different from what I was earlier.

It was the village I had grown up in … yet, it seemed somewhat strange.

First, I went to Chittu’s home.

It is not his home any longer. It is an orphanage bearing the name ‘Mother’s Abode’.

In the veranda, I noticed three photographs: Mother Teresa, Chittu and our Raghupati Varma teacher.

Sitting in an old wooden reclining chair was Vaidehi. Two boys sat facing her—they couldn't be more than five or six.

She was oiling the hair of the boy wearing a red shirt. The other, in a striped shirt, was laughing aloud.

'Didn't I say so, Mother? His head is as rough as a sugarcane field. No matter how much oil you apply, you cannot tame it.' He laughed again.

'Then what should I do?' she didn't say these words, but turned her eyes as if to ask that.

'What does one do with a cane crop? The only go is to chop it!' he replied, controlling his laughter.

The boy wearing the red shirt got really angry. 'See what he is saying, Mother,' he complained in a sing-song voice.

'They will have to shave your head. It is a sparrow's nest,' the red shirt said to the other one. They began chasing each other round the chair she was sitting on. Her smile brightened her face.

'Rajanna!'

Just one word—that of a rishi coming out of penance.

She remained stoic. Not having seen her for so many years, tears fell from my eyes.

'Teacher passed away and so did Chittu, how did you manage all these years?' I enquired. She pointed to the photograph of Mother Teresa. Perhaps she had converted, I thought to myself.

The two boys were still running round her.

'Are these boys your companions?'

She stopped them as she stood up and ushered me into the house. So many children! I lost track of time.

'Uncle is visiting us, that is why there is payasam for us today.' No sooner had she completed her sentence than cups and spoons showed up in the children's hands.

One child said, 'Mother!', and offered up a spoonful of payasam, looking at Vaidehi. She gestured towards me, transferring that affection.

'Come and eat, Uncle,' they said, and began serving a spoon each into my bowl.

Twenty spoonfuls and a stomach filled with happiness.

She bowed her head in silent prayer.

There is no difference among these three. Like father, like son. Like husband, like wife. While the devotion of Master and Chittu can be termed patriotism, Vaidehi's devotion is to God. But, for all three of them, bhakti meant giving.

*

To get to Vincent's house, I have to cross the railway track.

In the past, one couldn't see this neighbourhood after dusk. But now it is visible. Now there is a cement road and some electric lights. How strange! The household chores are all being done on the road itself! Women are scouring dishes, men pour warmed water over their bodies, old men sit around smoking, and children play … one can hear a lot of words, a rumble of words.

Where the road ends, there is a church. Vincent's house is just past that church.

There is no change … the same old thatched house, though now there is a road where the front yard was. There is a rope cot placed on the road. Sitting on it is an old man—Krupa's father.

I went up and stood close to him.

He looked me up and down, moving his hands all over my body …

'Baba? Incenta?' he asked. I wasn't surprised at this, for he must have thought I was his son-in-law, Vincent.

'So, you're back from military? I thought I might die before seeing you. You are my son as much as my son-in-law, aren't you … How come you have lost so much weight? I suppose your entire salary goes on my food and your mother-in-law's medicines … what would be left to feed yourself! Will you be staying at least ten days? Your wife will cook fish and prawns for you … ' the old man said.

'Whenever anyone visits this house, he thinks it is his son-in-law,' remarked a passer-by.

Vincent had lost his mother when he was very young. His father died while he was doing his intermediate. He had to help with the marriages of his two older sisters. So he dropped out of school and joined the army as a soldier. He managed to get them married off. Impressed with his job in the military, this old man had given his only daughter, Krupa, in marriage to Vincent. Thus the son-in-law became a son.

I decided to let the old man feel happy for some more time and so pretended to be Vincent.

He patted my head and remarked that my hair has grown too long. The next morning, he said, he would personally cut it. He kept making several other promises like that.

There was a lot of noise … everyone was talking at the same time in that basti … but I could identify Krupa's voice.

I looked up to see dark Krupa in a white saree walking towards the house, greeting everyone she passed.

She was carrying a heavy bag in one hand and a bible in the other. She didn't notice me.

'What is the heavy stuff you are carrying, Krupamma?' the woman from next door enquired.

'Nothing, Sister, Agneesamma called me to pray and gave me three kilos of rice. She sent a message saying that her grandson was unwell, that is why I went. Driver John's wife gave me two eggs … ' as she was speaking, she noticed me.

'Who is that? Is it you, Rajanna?' She came close to me and said, 'So, you've remembered us at last,' and sat down on the rope cot.

'Krupamma, it has been a while since Vincent came. Where were you? Aren't you going to put the rice on the fire?' the old man shouted.

Krupa laughed softly. Her laughter was filled with sadness.

'How is your mother, Krupa?' I asked.

'As always, Brother. She is confined to the bed,' She rose, pointing to the bucket of water placed by the roadside, hinting that I should wash my feet before coming in. I too rose to do that.

'You must eat with us … otherwise the old man will get upset'. She went in and didn't come out for a long time. Meanwhile, I became Vincent again and entertained the old man.

Krupa came out saying, 'I will be right back,' and hurried across into the single-storey house opposite. She was making some arrangements. She had been like that—even when Vincent was alive. It was difficult to absorb her affection and remain calm.

Somehow everything was ready in about an hour. She served me in the house opposite hers.

'I would like to eat in your house,' I pleaded, but she wouldn't hear of it.

'My house isn't as clean now as it used to be, Brother. Mother is sickly, you see,' she explained. She served me the egg curry again and again. It was a very satisfying meal. Actually, what she served was not just another meal … she had spent her entire earnings of the day on that meal. It was nine-thirty and my train was to leave at ten.

'I am planning to remain in this country now … so I will visit you often,' I said and started for the railway station.

Krupa prayed, seeking a safe journey for me … her prayer was full of words.

I put in her hands what little money I had in my purse, disregarding her protests. She came to see me off along with ten other men and women from that basti. The railway station was the way it always was. No major changes. The same old banyan tree, moonlight, and now light from the electric bulbs, lots of breeze; with Krupa by my side, I was reminded of Vincent's last journey.

'It was here, wasn't it, Brother,' Krupa too tried to bring back that memory.

'Don't, Sister, don't remind me of that day,' I said, fearing that she might cry.

The bell rang, announcing the train's arrival.

'How do you manage to run the household, Krupa?' I asked.

'Jesus is running it. He shows me some way or the other every single day, Rajanna. I go and conduct a prayer session and they put some money in my hand. Of course, there is some of Vincent's pension money—not much though,' Krupa replied frankly.

For these people, bhakti means being able to have a square meal … for Vincent, bhakti meant patriotism, and for Krupa bhakti is being devoted to her God.

I could hear the sound of an approaching train.

The skeletal remains of a moth-eaten leaf fell into my hand.

Suddenly I remembered something that had skipped my mind.

'I came to your home, but did not see your mother, Krupa!' I said, holding her hand affectionately.

Those words seemed to have broken her resolve.

'Annayya!' she cried loudly. Her cries mixed with the sound of the train.

The train came into the station and stopped.

'Mother is dead, Annayya. After I returned, remember I went inside? She was dead by then. I thought if I gave you that news, you might leave without eating. That's why I didn't tell you.'

I was speechless. But she spoke again.

'I thought, God, why did she have to die when I am penniless. You came like a God and gave me this money. I will give her a proper burial. I will never forget your kindness, Annayya.'

She stood there, her hands folded. Everyone who had come with her wept.

I boarded the train.

So much sorrow! Vaidehi had overcome it with the silence that her wealth made possible; poverty gave Krupa only words with which to swallow her sorrow.

The train left the station. On the right side of the track is Chittu's village and on the left side lies Vincent's basti.

This train runs, splitting into two, not only the darkness of this night, but also my country.

Yendluri Sudhakar

A fascinating, yet-unwritten history of the region that covers modern-day Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu and of Hyderabad city, comes to light as Yendluri Sudhakar, a leading figure in the new wave of dalit poetry in the 1990s, writes a history of three generations of his family. 'Madiga families have a tradition of sitting around in the evenings and telling stories about their past. These memories are shared and cherished, and so the history remains alive,' his wife, the poet and academic Hemalatha Putla, points out.

Sudhakar was born in 1959 in his maternal uncle's small hut in Pamulabasti, one of the largest and best-known dalitwadas in Nizamabad. His mother's family, who had migrated from near Nanded in Maharashtra, spoke Marathi. His father moved to the basti from Ravikuntapalli in Prakasam. His father's people were cobblers and cowherds. In the 'hungry thirties', many migrated to the cities, attaching themselves as scavengers and cobblers to military camps—they had no education; caste was the only qualification necessary for these jobs. If they were lucky and had connections, they ended up finding jobs in the government as chaprasis (attendants). His grandfather Yendluri Chinaguravaiah's three sons—Maddaiah, Devaiah and Nagaratnam—reached Madras (now Chennai). Sudhakar's father, Maddaiah, who was twenty-two at the time, set out first and found himself a job in the Buckingham Mills as a worker. His two brothers joined him in Madras, finding jobs as municipal workers (cleaners in the corporation area), and his father landed a government job as a chaprasi for a salary of ten rupees. Around that time, he also converted to Christianity. Ten rupees was a big amount at the time. For one rupee you could buy a buffalo—enough for the whole village to feast on; for five rupees, a dwelling place in Pamulabasti! In 1953, when Andhra Pradesh became a separate state, Maddiah opted to move to Kurnool, and then in 1956 he came to Hyderabad. The stables at the First Lancer Barracks in the town had been turned into housing for attenders, and they lived there with their uncle Devaiah.

On the maternal side of his family, there is another line of madiga history. Sudhakar's grandfather, Samuel Gaikwad, was a worker in a big textile mill in Nanded. He used to participate in the Hebron gospel meetings of Bakht Singh in Hyderabad. (Brother Bakht Singh was a highly popular evangelist among the Protestant Christians in India. He set up many local churches in different parts of the country and is hailed as the father of indigenous churches. In the mid-1950s, he made Hebron in Hyderabad his base. He died

in 2000 after an illustrious career.) People would flock to these meetings from the areas surrounding the city. These gatherings were also places where marriages were arranged. Gaikwad arranged the marriage of his elder daughter to an RTC driver from Tandur and his younger daughter, Shantabai, was married to Maddaiah in 1957. His mother's family was rooted in the Christian culture. Their connections with the American Baptist Mission went back to the time of his grandfather's grandfather, who was associated with the legendary missionary John E. Clough, popularly known as the 'Apostle of the Telugus'. The old man would tell the story of first seeing trousers and wondering: 'How can you put both legs in at the same time; what is this belt?' At that time, madigas were not allowed on the main street and had to find their way through the back streets. When he became a Christian, he began feeling insulted by this for the first time.

In 1962, Sudhakar's family moved to their own place in the Domalguda basti in Hyderabad. 'Even though it was an urban basti,' Sudhakar recalls, 'everything there happened "village-style".' There were people from all over the state. And they brought with them their language variants, their culture and traditions, their food habits, mentalities, dress. Many inter-caste Ambedkarite marriages took place.' His parents had seven children, two of whom died.

'My first school was the Krupanandam Veedhi Badi, a street school where the fees were four annas [25 paise] a month. The school had children from Phool Bagh, Gangan Mahal and Domalguda bastis. I moved on to Pranavananda Rashtriya Vidyalaya. I used to compose poems (ashu kavita) even in school. There were many Muslim children who discussed their culture, and Urdu poetry made a big impact on me. Those days, in the village, every house had a dappu. On every occasion, dappu vayinchadam, chindu veyadam [playing the drum and dancing] was routine. By the time I was five or six, I was reading Telugu. I remember reading about Nehru's death in May 1964 in the *Andhra Patrika* daily. I composed a poem about the red rose's tears [the red rose in his sherwani pocket symbolized Nehru]. My practice of composing poems on different occasions, or to commemorate significant events, began at school itself. I loved rhythmic language, rhyming words, sorrowful tunes, famine songs, folk songs.' His first poem was published in *Andhra Patrika* when he was in class ten.

'This creativity has a lot to do with the culture I was born into. The aesthetics of cobbling, cleaning, agriculture, our music and song—all this came into my poetry. Madigas take great pride in their work; one must learn how to skin an animal on the ground without the dirt touching the flesh. We learnt how to use different leathers for different effects. The skin of a two-year-old calf makes the "kiri-kiri" chappals that the landlords wear. Leather for the dappu has other qualities, and must be processed with special care. There is a story about my ancestors, whose expertise with the dappu was

such they could stop a galloping horse in its tracks by picking up its heartbeat on their drums. [This story is translated here.] There is another story about chappals, made in the shape of a swan, with the colours of the rainbow, and stitches so tiny that they were invisible. All these skills declined after companies like Bata were set up. We also have a very individualistic work culture. No one listens to anyone else. Like artists everywhere, we hate bossism.'

In high school, Sudhakar read the Telugu classics as well as modern poetry. He used to attend many kavi sammelans (gatherings of poets). This early poetry, he says, was romantic and idealistic. It was during and after the Emergency in 1975, through contact with the Left, its literature and poetic wall slogans that he began to gain social understanding. He acquired a bachelor's degree in oriental languages and studied for certification as a Telugu schoolteacher between 1976 and 1978. The family's economic conditions were very strained. His father had become blind. Since classes were in the evenings, Sudhakar could work during the day. He did a series of different small jobs. 'I realized that poetry would not put food on the plate,' he says. Student movements in Osmania University were at their peak just then. He met and listened to important progressive and revolutionary writers, including, he recalls, Varavara Rao and Sivasagar. When the massacre took place in Karamchedu in 1985, Sudhakar was a schoolteacher. He says of that time: 'I wrote my first dalit poem, which was published in *Spandana*. It is a poem that carries the names of my Yendluri ancestors.' Between 1984 and 1989, he worked on his MA and M.Phil degrees, doing his thesis on Gurram Jashuva's autobiography under N. Gopi.

He began reading Ambedkar and realized that 'all literature until now is actually agrahara [brahminical] literature. Revolutionary poetry too remained in that stream. Even Sivasagar's poetry was not able to break with it. A dalit sahityam is yet to come. I began writing poetry from my experience. Poems about people, things, places, occasions never seen, felt or known, never recognized in literature. Poetry had never allowed an untouchable into its house. After I began, everything I touched became black gold. There have been many poems written about the Godavari, for example. Poets have written about its different moods, compared its flow to that of the Vedas and so on. I wrote: "The Godavari flows like the molten lead that is poured into dalit ears." [Dalits were not allowed to bathe in this sacred river.] Again, there are a large number of mainstream poems in Telugu about the monsoon rain. Rain was compared to amrutham [ambrosia] and so on. I wrote: "Rainy season: Thick irani chai."

'Literary historian David Shulman identifies the sixteenth century as the era of great Telugu poetry. But from a dalit point of view, it was no great period. There was no dalit writer, nothing much in it for dalits. A dalit consciousness emerges in Telugu literature only in the late 1980s when a dalit ideology also takes shape, and dalits begin looking

at themselves through Ambedkarite eyes. “So far the talk has been about class war, what about caste war?” we asked. There is so much violence, so many atrocities, rape, exploitation, humiliation. We needed to defend ourselves, struggle for our rights. It is in this context that a dalit literature emerges. Poetry, story, drama, song, novella, criticism, theory—it gushed out as if a dam had burst, and it was all by dalits. We not only had dalit content, but also the variety of dalit forms.

‘Karamchedu was of course central to it, but there was also a critical mass of writers and intellectuals who came together: Tripuraneni Srinivas, G. Lakshmi Narasaiah, HRK, Oo Sa, Satish Chandar, Prasen, Sitaram,Madduri Nagesh Babu, Pydi Theresh Babu and Kopparthi, among others. They brought new places and a new point of view into literature. *Chikkanavutunna Pata* [A Thickening Song] embodies that moment. I would say that the new dalit ideology was created in this poetry. Then in Hyderabad Central University, a madiga writers’ forum was formed. Nagappagari Sunderraju and Gundedappu Kanakaiah were the live wires of this early Dandora movement. They received support from other universities too. It is a big moment. If in such historical moments I am silent, tomorrow I will have to give an account of myself to history. My poem, “Dandora”, is dedicated to our mala brothers, the poets Madduri Nagesh Babu and Maddela Shantaiah and our own Nagappagari Sunderraju.’

Yendluri regards the movement for categorization as a critical one. Madigas have not benefited from reservations the way malas have. He speaks with pain about the tension that has emerged between the malas and madigas, but argues that unity should never demand that injustice remain. ‘I speak as an anti-dalit madiga.’ It was not easy for him to take this position. There were attacks on his poetry; letters and postcards were sent addressed to ‘Y. Sudhakar Madiga’; some of his own students stopped talking to him.

Sudhakar began his career as a Telugu pandit in 1985 in Wesley Boys College, Secunderabad, and is now working as professor and dean, Sahitya Peetham (School of Literature) in Telugu University, Rajahmundry campus. His publications include *Vartamanam* (The Present, 1985; a collection of poetry and three long poems), *Kotta Gabbilam* (The New Bat, 1998; the title is a reference to Jashuva’s famous *Gabbilam*); *Vargeekaraneeyam* (The Struggle for Categorization, 2004); and *Gosangi* (A Dalit Caste, 2011). His other works include *Mallemoggala Godugu* (Narratives of Madiga Life, 1999) and *Nalladrakshapandiri* (2002; a bilingual anthology of poetry). His PhD thesis, ‘Jashuva, Sahityam Drukpatham and Parinamam’ (Literary Works of Jashuva: Vision and Evolution), was published in 2007. He has received more than twenty-five awards including the Free Verse Front in 1992; the Kavikokila Jashuva Award, Telugu University in 1996; the Andhra Pradesh Official Language Association Award in 2006; and the Andhra Pradesh Government Ugadi Literary Award in 2007. He visited the US in 2002 and Mauritius in 2011 to read his poetry.

Drumbeat

Translated by Syed Mujeebuddin

I am speaking about a truth;
about a pain haunting us
for thousands of years.

I do not wear a mask any longer.
To my cobbler's lament, no words, no language barrier now.
Today I dump aesthetics onto the dung heap;
I chuck my present fame into the abyss;
I stomp under my feet the rhythm and melody of my old poetic lines;
I chase away the fine sounds of my poetry.
I now speak just as I am:
as a madiga, a cobbler,
a slipper-stitching slogger,
a carcass collector, a gravedigger, a scavenger,
these are all me.
These are my people,
and I am speaking about my race.
I am not King Shibi to carve out a piece of my thigh.
I am not Shambuka to bend my head to the sword.
Fire rages in my eyes.
I am the brave Veerabahu
ready to let my blood flow.
I am Kannamaneedu.[1]

Gratitude runs in my blood.
Equality is the principle of my race.

Cutting up carcasses and making piles,
to share equally among ourselves,
that is the cultural legacy of my grandfather.
And I am arguing now for my share,
raising the question of my rights.

I don't know how to humiliate, or to deceive.
Speaking the truth fearlessly is my creed
and now I am speaking about you.
Unwrapping tightly wound bundles of pain
I ask: who laid the untouchable bridge
between your street and mine?
I write the truth of experience.
The rungs of the ladder, the masks, insults, inequalities are
marks not only of the upper castes.
They also display the disparity among our own people.
You turn your face away when you glimpse
the garlands of meat hung out to dry before our huts.

Why do you talk about us with derision?
Our food turns your stomach.
If you pass this way, you cover your noses.
Your legs quiver if they cross our thresholds.
Your thirst vanishes when you see our tumblers.
I am asking you now—
Who wove this intense web of dissimulation?

Forget marital relations with us,
when even our presence revolts you.
You drove nails into our hearts.

We are insulted at every corner.
Like the crows that hound other birds out of their nests,

you take over what is our culture.
You are always the first to represent our experience.
Our votes are always your votes.
You abuse with the name of my caste.
Did we not hug your words to ourselves?
Did we not lift you to the skies whenever you wrote about us?
'Only *we* can write about our experience'—
we never drew such dividing lines.
'Recognize our rights and write about them.' This, we want.
All this time, for your poetic ornamentation, your metaphors,
whose lives provided the substance? The imagery?

Whose souls provided the garb to your words?
The base of your platforms?
Did your grandfathers stitch slippers?
Did your fathers beat the drums?
Do you even know the smell of leather?
Visit the madigawada once.
You will learn the difference between your street and our locality.
You will grasp the heartbeat of the drumbeat.

'Ask, and you shall be given.'
These words, spoken by Jesus,
are more familiar to you than to us!
We are now asking for our rights.
Our leather straps are now creaking-full of new voices.
The lowly drumming hearts are aflame.
Hands that collect dung are now afire.
Cobbling knives sharp and shouting,
anvils roaring,
leather-belted bells on oxen necks bellowing.
This is the dalit war for justice!

Heads here cannot be bent.
The balance of rights lies between us.

The rebellion is not against your street
but against your domination.
Come! In Jambavati's raga let's join our voices in the call for rights.
On Arundathi's branches let us harmoniously graft ourselves.
Let us make one the two stairs that lie between us.
Let us destroy the rungs of this ladder.
Let us build a new dalit world.
Let us make it real!

The translator thanks Dr Pillalamarri Ramulu
for his help and suggestions.

The Drumbeat That Made the Nawab's Horse Dance

Translated by N. Manohar Reddy

One day Balakotanna told me that Yesunayana knows the history of the Yendluris inside out. I was eager to learn more about my past, so I hurried over to Yesunayana's house. He was resting outside on a cot. I sat down on it, near his feet. He moved to make space for me to sit comfortably.

It was already night and the moon was up.

'What brings you here at this time of night, my dear? You're not used to the dark. You shouldn't be moving around in it,' he said.

Putting on a brave face, I replied, 'You needn't worry about that. I'm not scared, really. Fear does not run in my blood! I hear that you know how we came to be in these parts.'

'Oh that! That happened about a hundred years ago. Originally, we lived in Pullalacheruvu. Three brothers from there migrated to this village, Raviguntapalli. There were no madigas here at that time. The madigas of Markondapuram used to come here to make shoes, but they would always return to their village.

‘That was how these three brothers came to be sitting outside Raviguntapalli and making shoes. One day the village elders came to them and said [using a demeaning form of address], “Yaandira! Tell us who you are. Which village are you from?”

‘They replied, “We’re from Pullalacheruvu and we’ve come here to work.”

‘Then the elders asked them if the brothers would like to come to their village and do the madiga work there.

‘“If there are no madigas there, then we’d certainly come. But if people from our community are already living there, we wouldn’t like to come and take away their livelihood,” our people responded.

‘“Markondapuram is really far. We’ll stop the madigas from there who come here to work. But if we do that, you must promise that you will offer us all the services that fall to the madiga’s lot in our village,” the elders demanded.

‘Our people agreed to those conditions. They set up their huts and have been living and working here since then.’

‘I’ve heard that around that time, a theft occurred in this village,’ I said.

‘You know the nayakas … the ones who are called boyas … it seems they used to steal grain from the fields during the harvest. But the farmers accused the madigas of stealing their crops. Distressed by such an accusation, the three brothers said, “Sirs, we, the madigas, cultivate barren wastelands and depend on dead animals for food. We work hard to survive, but we never steal. Since you suspect us, we will find the culprits ourselves.”

‘So the farmers decided to wait. The brothers took the task upon themselves and remained vigilant. One night, twelve boyas cut the millet crop, tied the stalks into bundles and were ready to carry them away. They did not know that our people were watching them, hiding in the bushes next to the stream.’

‘Did our people catch them and hand them over to the farmers?’ I asked.

‘If our people had not caught them that day, we wouldn’t have been in this village today. Our community is known for its integrity, isn’t it?’ he declared with pride.

‘These three brothers were exceptionally skilful in their work. One was a great archer. Pulling at the bowstrings, he would send the arrow straight at the target! The second, an expert shoemaker, and the third, a superb dappu player.

‘The first brother, hiding in the dark, aimed his arrows at the boyas. They dropped the bundles and quietly sneaked off to their homes as if nothing had happened. Our people also came home and slept. In the morning, the farmers found the bundles all over the fields, but not the people who tied them up.

‘The whole village descended on the madigas, accusing them of the crime. The madigas led the farmers to the boya neighbourhood and called out for the boyas, but no one ventured out.

‘Then peering into the boya homes, the farmers called out to them by their names. Instead of the boya men, their womenfolk responded. They came out and said, “Our husbands are not here. They’ve gone out to another village.” While the women were being questioned about how all the men could disappear at the same time, one man slowly emerged from his house. And then, one after the other, all the boya men came out and accepted their guilt.

‘When the village elders realized that our people were not guilty, they looked at the brothers with new appreciation. They said, “All three of you must stay on in our village. We will grant you mirasi land,” and immediately summoned the village karanam [a brahmin who is traditionally the village revenue official] and arranged for the transfer of the land.

‘After some time, the nawabs became the rulers in the area.

‘The Pigisarla hill posed a hurdle for these horse-riding nawabs, but they found a way of coming to Raviguntapalli through Pederlapadu. Once, when the nawabs were about to visit our village, the farmers approached our people and counselled them: “Ore, the nawab is coming to our village to collect taxes. If you go and welcome his entourage with your dappus, you’ll receive a handsome gift.”

‘The three brothers picked up their dappus, warmed them [since they are made of leather, dappus need to be warmed to ensure the right tone], and walked up the hill outside the village. The nawab hadn’t arrived yet so they rested under a tree and started playing the horse-beat. The moment the nawab’s Arabian horse heard the beat, it began galloping towards the brothers. A stunned nawab tried to rein it in, but in vain. The horse flew through the air, frothing at the mouth, while the nawab’s soldiers ran helplessly behind.

‘Sitting on the other side of the hill with their eyes closed, the brothers were immersed in playing their dappus. Their horse-beat rhythm had a magical effect on the nawab’s horse. Galloping in step with the beat, it raced towards them and reached the top of the hill. Our people were at the foot of the hill. The horse could hear the beat clearly now. It paused for a while at the top of the hill and then began dancing as if under a spell. Bewildered by this turn of events, the nawab whipped the horse hard. But it continued to dance, unmindful of the pain.

‘The nawab was at a loss. He did not know what to do. But the horse glided swiftly down the hill and towards our three brothers. Greeting them with a cheerful neigh, it began dancing again, adding to the music with the pounding rhythm of its hooves.

‘Startled by this sudden turn, our people opened their eyes, only to find the nawab standing before them! Finally, the nawab understood why his horse had been dancing so spiritedly all this while. He commended the brothers on their amazing skill. The brothers in turn saluted the nawab, and welcoming him with the royal beat of their drums, led him into the village.

‘After that, the Raviguntapalli farmers took charge of the horse. They tethered it to a tree in Gogulaguntha and fed it cooked gram, green grass and water.

‘After he had collected the taxes, and before he returned, the nawab summoned the three brothers. They came and stood before him with folded hands. Looking at them, he said, “You people! You made my horse dance! Ask for anything you want.”

‘Then, they said, “Sir, please grant us the Gogulaguntha land where your horse was tied today. That will be a great asset to us.”

‘The nawab granted them the land and immediately passed the orders.

‘That was two acres and eight cents.’

*

‘After some time, the nawab visited Raviguntapalli once again in order to collect taxes. As he was preparing to return, the brothers greeted him with salaams and placed at his feet a pair of kirru seppulu, which they had brought carefully wrapped in a towel. The nawab alighted from his horse, and removed his old chamki [ornate] footwear. As he put his right foot into the new shoe, it cried out: Ayya [sir]! Then he placed his left foot into the other shoe, and it also cried, Ayya!

‘The nawab was astonished. He took the shoes into his hands and examined them with great interest. He was even more surprised to find no stitches on the shoes. They were made of the skin of a young calf with utmost skill and care. They weighed only two tolas [a tola is about eleven grams]. The nawab was speechless. He was so delighted with the shoes that he said: “These shoes are not made for the feet; they can crown the head.”

‘Since it was only proper that he should reward these exceptionally skilled brothers, he said, “I’ll grant you a gift. Wish for what you want.”

‘“Your Highness! We are three brothers. And our families have grown bigger. We have to feed our relatives too. Please grant us some land,” they submitted.

‘The nawab responded generously to their request and granted eight acres and fifteen cents of mirasi land. The land granted by the nawab on these occasions is what we still live on today. Of course, the karanams tried to grab this land but they haven’t been successful so far.’

I said, ‘Perhaps it is not just our people and our neighbourhoods that are untouchable for them, but our land too. Could that be the reason they have spared our land?’

Laughing out loud, Yesunayana replied, ‘They certainly treat us as untouchables, but not our land. These days they are even buying our land.’

I sensed a sadness in his tone as he added, ‘Why blame others? Our own people are selling their land and migrating to cities. Just wait and see! Soon huge buildings will be erected by the karanams all over the untouchable neighbourhoods.’

Kalekuri Prasad

The song ‘Krishna jilla Kanchikacherla Kotesu Katha vinarandi’ (Come, listen to the story of Kanchikacherla Kotesu of Krishna district) in 1984 marked the beginning of Kalekuri Prasad’s writing activism. This song, which immediately became immensely popular, is about a dalit labourer who was burnt alive in 1968, a ghastly incident that attracted widespread attention. Dalit leader and Congressman Babu Jagjivan Ram raised the issue in Parliament. Almost all Telugu dalit writers and poets refer to this killing as the first of the caste-based atrocities in Andhra Pradesh. Kalekuri’s life as a poet, activist, critic, translator, editor and thinker is closely linked to this event, which the poem ‘Road’, translated here, makes clear.

The Telangana Armed Struggle of the 1940s had a strong impact on Kanchikacherla and the surrounding villages in Krishna district. The communist leaders of that movement were from the dominant kamma caste. The leaders of the non-brahmin and the rationalist movements of the first half of the twentieth century were also kammas. In the late 1960s, in the context of the Naxalite movement, the malas and madigas came into the picture and began a long struggle against the domination of the kammas and kapus. Kanchikacherla has a long history of such struggle. Katta Ramaiah had been brutally murdered there in the 1960s when he organized dalits. The malapalle of Kanchikacherla is famous for its assertion.

The murder of Kotesu reveals a story of sharp economic and political changes in the district. The introduction of tobacco cultivation transformed the social and economic relations between the farmers and agricultural labourers. As a result, the labourers, a majority of them mala, developed self-confidence, while the kamma and kapu farmers became richer and grew more powerful. With their jobs in the tobacco industry, the large group of malas in Kanchikacherla became relatively independent. This was the context in which Kotesu was burnt alive for ‘theft’. The major agitation that followed was led by the mala youth of Kanchikacherla.

It is in this small town of Kanchikacherla that Kalekuri Deva Vara Prasad was born into a mala family on 25 October 1962. His father Kalekuri Srinivasa Rao was headmaster in the malapalle’s CSI school. His mother, Lalita Sarojini, was a teacher in the school. She became headmaster after his father’s retirement. ‘My mother had vowed before Christ that if the child was male, she would offer it to Him as a gift. In keeping with this practice, my mother gifted me to God and bought me back in an open auction,’

he told us. Kalekuri read the Bible out of compulsion in school, but never became a believing Christian. However, he says that Christianity contributed to his desire to live well and to help others. He is the eldest son in a family of three boys and two girls. His sisters and brothers are well educated.

Kalekuri began his schooling in the CSI school, but was later sent to Alexander High School in the nearby town of Eluru. He studied there from the third to the seventh class and stayed at the KNH hostel. He returned to Kanchikacherla during 1977–78 and completed his schooling from the Zilla Parishad High School there. Kalekuri then joined the Andhra Christian College, Guntur, to study science for his intermediate examinations. 'I had a lot of freedom in AC College. I had money; a free environment. There was no one to ask me whether I went to college. I began drinking during the month-ending dinners,' Kalekuri recalls. He never completed his intermediate. Later, he applied to the Open University for the BA course, but could not pursue it.

Kalekuri returned to Kanchikacherla in 1980. Balasouri and Chalam, both organizers from People's War, had been visiting the village. Mariya Das and Vinod were active in the malapalle. Kalekuri came into contact with the Radical Youth League (RYL), and began work as an organizer of the party. He also became a member of VIRASAM (Viplava Rachayitala Sangham). He remembers the intense political activity of the radical Left in Krishna district, with Vijayawada as a centre: 'Radical Nagar near Sunnapu Batteela Centre in Vijayawada, where the urban poor had occupied the slum area and constructed houses, was our base. We used to live and sleep there. The dalit issue was not a central point in our discussions those days. Revolution was the main issue. VIRASAM and the civil liberties movements were part of the revolutionary movement.' There was a great deal of debate when the Karamchedu massacre took place in 1985 [about whether it should be understood as class violence or caste violence]. 'Since the culprits were relatives of N.T. Rama Rao, chief minister at that time, we analysed it as a class conflict, not as a caste issue.' Kalekuri describes the period between1985 and 1991 as a phase of vacillation. He joined the newspaper *Andhra Bhoomi* as a sub-editor in 1989. He met Navata there. 'Though some friends opposed our inter-caste marriage, Navata's family accepted it and behaved in a dignified manner. The marriage was not successful. Both of us failed. Perhaps I am more in the wrong than her,' Kalekuri observes.

His song 'Karmabhoomilo Poosina O Puvva' (O Delicate Flower of Our Holy Land) was one of the first songs on the issue of dowry death. Recollecting those days, he acknowledges the role of VIRASAM in helping him grow as a writer. The opportunity to read literature widely, converse and personally interact with writers, and discuss techniques in writing were all invaluable in his growth as a writer. In 1989, he helped conceptualize the folk drama *Karamchedu Oggu Katha* and composed some songs for

it. Kalekuri, popularly known by his pen name Yuvaka, resigned from VIRASAM sometime in 1990–91. There were personal reasons, but the emergence of the dalit movement was the larger context for his decision.

During 1990–91, Kalekuri also gave up his job at *Andhra Bhoomi*, returned to Kanchikacherla and began working in the Ambedkar Yuvajana Sangham there. In 1991, Das and he took up the issue of a madiga boy who was killed by kammas in the nearby Gokarajupalli village. They staged a dharna in Kanchikacherla.

After the 1991 massacre in Chunduru, Katti Padma Rao (of the Dalit Mahasabha) visited the village. Kalekuri became president of the Dalit Mahasabha's Krishna district unit in 1992. Das and Kalekuri worked together actively till 1995. In this phase, Kalekuri wrote a number of songs and poems and emerged as an important dalit intellectual. His song on the Chunduru massacre, 'Kumili poyina, naligi poyina, Chunduru gundela gayam' (The wound of Chunduru that crushed and pounded the heart), and on the dalit poet Jashuva, 'Dalita akasapu dhruvatara' (The Pole Star of the dalit sky), were powerful dalit literary expressions of the 1990s. Kalekuri recollects, 'When the writing coming out of VIRASAM declined in force, Theresh and Madduri started writing. They gave up their old ways and began writing in the dalit language. I was influenced by this. I published one poem every month. If the poems can stand up to time, they will.'

Leaders like Ingilala Ramachandraiah, K.G. Satyamurthy, U. Sambasiva Rao, Katti Padma Rao and Tharakam were all involved in various efforts to mobilize dalits. Kalekuri was associated with Katti Padma Rao.

Commenting on the dalit movement and its ideology, he observes, 'Whether it became a movement or not, it put down roots. We understood the roots, therefore we could understand the shape of what existed and what could come. Whether they liked it or not, many forms of caste had to be recognized. From scavenging to upper casteism—all forms were analyzed. We acquired a perspective that could read the mind of the smiling man wearing white clothes. This is the strength of Ambedkar and Phule.'

In 1993, K.G. Satyamurthy asked Kalekuri to take up the responsibility of editing *Ekalavya*, a little magazine that he had started. *Ekalavya* dealt with contemporary dalit issues that were not discussed in print anywhere else, and it provided a space for debates that had been begun in other forums but were discontinued. Later, Kalekuri joined *Sakshi*, a new little magazine for dalit human rights, set up by the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights. His job involved monitoring and documenting atrocities, framing demands and also participating in local activity. He left *Sakshi* on the issue of directorship. He was critical of the rise of NGOs addressing dalit issues, saying that they 'transformed the dalit movement into an NGO'.

Kalekuri has commented extensively on Telugu literature and intervened in debates on dalit literature in the 1990s. As the article translated here also shows, he attributed the decline of the dalit literary movement to a crisis in the dalit movement itself and careerism among dalit poets. He quickly acknowledges that the madiga literary movement produced some good literature, even though some malas objected to it on grounds of divisiveness.

Kalekuri has translated several important books and small booklets from English to Telugu for the Hyderabad Book Trust and other publications. These include Swamy Dharmateertha's *Hindu Imperialism*, Mahasweta Devi's *Rudaali*, Kishore Shantabai Kale's *Against All Odds* and NCDHR's *Broken People.* He has published one booklet titled *Dalita Udyamam*, *Dalita Sahityodyamam* [The Dalit Movement and the Dalit Literary Movement] and a book, *Andhra Pradesh Dalitulu* [Dalits of Andhra Pradesh]. His songs, poetry, literary criticism and essays are yet to be collected and published.

For a Fistful of Self-respect

Translated by N. Bhanutej

I do not know when I was born,
but I was killed on this very land thousands of years ago.
'*The endless cycle of birth and death*'
I do not know the theory of karma,
but I am being born, again and again, in the very place I died.
My land melted into this country
and became the plain between the Ganga and the Sindhu.
My eyeballs dissolved into tears, and
this country's perennial rivers flowed.
When lifeblood oozed from my veins,
riches rained down and the land turned verdant.
I was Shambuka in the Treta yuga.
Twenty-two years ago, I was Kanchikacherla Kotesu.
My birthplace is Kilvenmani, Karamchedu, Neerukonda.

Now, ‘Chunduru’ is the name the cold-blooded cruelty of landlords
has tattooed on my heart with their ploughs.
Chunduru is not a noun any longer; it’s a pronoun.
Each heart is now a Chunduru, a fiery tumour.
I’m the wound of the people, a communion of wounds.
For ages, a slave in a free country,
subject to insult, atrocity, rape, torture,
someone raising his head for a fistful of self-respect.
My very existence in this nation, drunk on caste and wealth,
is a protest.
I am someone who dies, time and again, to remain alive.
Don’t call me a victim.
I’m a martyr, I’m a martyr, I’m immortal.
I am the poison-throated one
who gulped down famine for you to have the surplus.
I am the upside-down sunrise.
I’m the one who kicked the sun in the face
to bring him to his feet.
I’m the one forging slogans in the fire of my heart.
I don’t need words of pity or tears of sympathy.
I’m not a victim, I’m a martyr.
An immortal banner of defiance.
Don’t shed tears for me.
If you can,
bury me in the town centre.
I will sprout into a bamboo grove that gives out the music of life.
Print my corpse as the cover picture for the nation,
I will glow as a beautiful future in the pages of history.
I will be a raging flame
that glows in this very country, again and again.

The Road

Translated by N. Bhanutej

Like me, the road too is dalit.
Feeling the footprint on the heart,
it winds into the past.
Is it fear? Or suspicion?
Or the teary music of eyelashes strumming heart-strings?
If you put your ears to its heart,
you will hear the sound of simmering tar.
Like me, the road too is dalit.
The disputes at the fields
move its motherly guts. Under
the macabre dance of rough feet
it burns like fury incarnate.
In order to express itself;
in order to prove itself,
it longs to spread like a song
along the ground.
Tell me,
have you ever heard the song
of the road lined with crucifixes?
Have you ever seen an assembly of
entangled roads marching in procession?
Have you ever joined in the protest song
when the corpse of a road, lynched,
fell right across, bringing
all traffic to halt?
Walk this road.
Once.
To my village.

The Dalit Movement and the Dalit Literary Movement

Translated by S.V. Srinivas

[From the 'Preface']

The entire recorded history of India is the history of the suppression of these, the earth's children. Declarations of dalit self-respect and the generations-old struggle for freedom, equality, brotherhood and self-reliance are the unwritten history of this country. This country's historical record is a conspiracy against actual history. Stories of kings, upper castes and victors pass off as national history as a result. From the puranas to the independence struggle and, for that matter, even to this day, the situation remains unchanged. With a single stab of the pen, Nannayya denied the very existence of dalit literary expressions, oral and folk poetic forms. He, who translated the Mahabharata, proclaimed that he was the first poet there was of Telugu language and soil. The literature of kings, upper-caste rulers and brahmins was recorded as constituting Telugu literary history. In this process, the marvellous literary expression of the dalit folk was made invisible.

The dalit movement and the dalit literary movement challenged this mode of writing history. Dalits began to dig deep into the past to reconstruct their history and literary history. The project, however, is far from complete and is also limited by its focus on individuals' achievements. It is indeed tragic that written forms alone are being considered the constituents of dalit literature by this project. Further, the process of incorporating literary forms and their creators without branding them as 'dalit literature' has not even begun. Likewise, just as stories of kings, rulers and heroes who had no connection with dalit struggles circulate as history, individual leaders' biographies are, sadly enough, substituting the histories of struggle.

No dalit took a short cut to a position of leadership. Innumerable hardships, sacrifices and a great deal of effort went into the pursuit of dalit aspirations before a leader could emerge. As far as Telugu history is concerned, from Bhagya Reddy Varma [Madari Bhagayya] to Manda Krishna Madiga and village-level organizers, every stage of the leadership's evolution was excruciating and demanded its share of sacrifices. And yet, by ignoring this historical process, we have failed to arrive at a dalit methodology for reconstructing history. Or, for that matter, a method for creating a leadership.

The centralization of power is inimical to dalit aspirations. Destruction of seats of power is the objective of the dalit movement. The process by which congealed power is made to flow, and flow all the way down to the lowest levels, remains to be discovered. Centralization results in unjust leadership. In the past, it stabilized the brahminical ideology's seats of power. It also created a context in which brahminical powers defined what literature was. Only literary analysts ratified by the so-called mahakavulu [great poets] had the authority to speak about literature. Progressive and revolutionary literary movements too adhered to the conventions of the mahakavulu. Dalit literature gave society democratic aesthetic values (prajaswamika viluvalu) that freed Telugu literature from the burden of the mahakavulu. We, dalit poets, declared that 'ordinary' people, who had not earned the title of poets and writers, routinely demonstrated poetic expressions and storytelling techniques in the course of their daily interactions and conversations. In comparison, the lines and writings of those who passed off as mahakuvulu were bland and quite useless as the building blocks of literature. We declared that we would make poems and stories with the expression of common people. It is regrettable that the question of who the top-ranked dalit writer is can even be asked, even in the most indirect manner.

The difficult task of reviewing the dalit movement and dalit literary movement is being undertaken in the face of harsh realities.

[Main Essay]

18 February 1968.

A burning form walked down National Highway 9. Vijayawada was another thirty-six kilometres away.

It was evening, time for the matinee show to end. A time when tobacco companies were done with grading work. The road was filled with people. They were startled. Afraid. Anxious about what would happen next. For that shape was human. His name was Kotesu. Aarukutla Kotesu. Kanchikacherla Kotesu. For thirty years now, that scene has haunted us. But have we not seen this before?

Because a servant wore white clothes

a dalit oiled and combed his hair

a madiga fell in love with an upper-caste girl

he was beaten, beaten, beaten and beaten till they tired of beating him, tied him to a pole, doused him with kerosene and set him aflame—they played the game of life and death with him.

On the heart pierced by wounds

was it not your footprints that I carried?

Wonder what he was murmuring, crying, or regretting.

My love, Madam … he sleep-talks. Could he possibly have known that this would be the punishment for falling in love? … '*Are you not the sole witness for the public accusation in the village square, accusation that I am a thief?'*

Flames eat away the body.

the furnace you lit in my heart

and the kerosene fire your folks lit on my body—

ask me which is more painful

and I cannot tell.

My love,

when these flames surround me,

it feels just like your embrace …

… he may, may not have said. His people looked at him. Afraid. Incapacitated. Agitated. Worried. He ran to the police station. And from there to the hospital. The doctor remembered the law and legal procedures. He refused treatment. Kotesu ran here, there, everywhere and eventually collapsed. They took him to Vijayawada. For four days, Kotesu struggled with death and then died.

His village wept. Hamlets in the vicinity trembled. Fearful of life. Afraid of the future. Today Kotesu. Whose turn tomorrow? So many had vanished before their eyes.

From Paritala came Vemula George. With Tangirala Shadrak beside him. Paritala, legendary Paritala, the village that made the Nizam shiver, was just two steps away from Kanchikacherla. They met Congress leaders and leaders of all other kinds. They telegraphed the DSP and collector. Filed a court case. Roamed dalit hamlets. Went around the villages … Then came the DSP's enquiry. Those who lived in fear till then came forward and gave evidence. Sisters who graded tobacco gave evidence. All the accused were arrested.

The court sentenced every one of the perpetrators to life imprisonment. In Parliament, Babu Jagjivan Ram declaimed with indignation. He collected Rs 5,000 from dalits in Bihar and gave the amount to Kotesu's family. Even newspapers in America wrote about this incident.

In September 1968, the Digambara poets dedicated their third volume of poetry to Kanchikacherla Kotesu. They termed the system putrid.

Where Kotesu collapsed now stands an Ambedkar statue. The movement-generation sprinted ahead. We don't know how things are now.

This was the first case of such violence against dalits recorded in police files after Independence, and didn't it cause a sensation at the national and international levels? To this day, Kotesu is the subject of dalit poets' lines. Kotesu, symbol of dalit aspirations. The still-raw indelible bloodstain on upper-caste landlords' altar of sacrifice.

The river Krishna flows by the fields of Kanchikacherla with Nalgonda on that side and Khammam on this. A slice of the coastal Andhra region in Telangana and a sliver of Telangana in coastal Andhra. The village was only just learning to eat rice. Tobacco farming came from western Krishna district. Farmers' houses now have the solidity that comes with wealth.

A class of new rich had emerged. Its arrogance, impatience and intolerance of lower castes' stirrings had increased.

Among dalits too, there was a budding consciousness of self-respect. From hopelessness and despair, the voice of defiance began to be heard. Across the state, dalits began to organize themselves.

It is possible to say that the post-Independence dalit movement received a major boost after this incident.

Every turn appears to be more significant than the one preceding it. When we look back after all these years, we can see that anti-caste consciousness goes a long way back in the Telugu country—to the days of the Independence struggle and even earlier. There is clear evidence of anti-brahmin consciousness in Telugu bhakti literature too.

Improved irrigation, development of agriculture, the spread of Christian Missionary education, Brahmo Samaj, Hindu religious reformers, the national movement and many other factors contributed to the political consciousness (chaitanyam) of untouchable castes. The Brahmo Samaj undertook a variety of activities, including opening of schools and hostels and distribution of wasteland that is vested in the government (poramboku) to dalits. It also encouraged dalit leaders. During this period, there was an effervescence of dalit consciousness. Sundru Venkayya, Kusuma Venkatramayya, Kusuma Dharmanna, Jala Rangakali, Nakka Chinavenkayya and other dalit leaders came into the limelight. It is no coincidence that every one of them was a poet. Kusuma Dharmanna's song, 'Makoddee Nalladoratanamoo' [We don't want this black overlordship either], reflected dalit aspirations of that period. Nakka Chinavenkayya's 'Antu Doshamu' [Polluting Touch], Jala Rangakali's 'Antaranivarevvaru?' [Who are the untouchables?], 'Malasuddhi' [Purification of the Polluted] and other poems expressed dalit longing for freedom, equality, self-respect and human dignity (manavatvam). The Gandhian movement had gathered considerable momentum. It conceived self-rule only as independence from colonial rule. These poets redefined self-rule and argued that it necessarily meant the liberation of dalits from caste oppression too. In addition to the efforts of these reformers, Montagu– Chelmsford Reforms and other colonial provisions

resulted in the growing political consciousness among dalits. Dalits began to make demands for representation in the colonial government. In this context, it is necessary to recall the role played by Bhagya Reddy Varma and the dalit movement under his leadership.

In the 1920s and '30s, dalits rejected the terms 'panchama' and 'harijan' and began to refer to themselves as 'adi-andhras' and 'adi-Hindus'. In 1927 a 'Panchama Mahajanasabha' [meeting of the untouchables] was organized under the leadership of Guduru Ramachandra Rao in Vijayawada. During this meeting, Bhagya Reddy Varma strongly opposed the use of the term 'panchama'. As a result, the event itself was renamed the First Conference of the Adi-Andhra Peoples. The Conference appealed to the government for adi-andhra representation in local bodies and the legislative council. It also appealed for the digging of new wells and special schools in places where mala and madiga castes lived. So apprehensive was the upper-caste society and its priestly class that the dalits attending the meeting would force their way into the famous Kanakadurga temple in Vijayawada town that the temple itself was shut down on that day. No doubt, this is an indication that the meeting and dalit movement in general was evoking considerable upper-caste anxiety.

From around 1910, Hyderabad, which was part of the Nizam's dominions, experienced a dalit movement led by Bhagya Reddy Varma [Madari Bhagayya], Arigay Ramaswamy and others. Bhagya Reddy Varma joined the Brahmo Samaj and began organizing dalits. The Manya Sanghalu, associations of the mala sub-castes that he established, attempted self-reformation. Their focus was on the prohibition of alcohol, putting an end to meat-eating and abolition of the devadasi system. Varma also worked towards the resolution of disputes within the community (panchayateello) and established schools, libraries and prayer halls. Considerable emphasis was laid on women's liberation.

Over the years, the dalit movement became Sanskritized. There was a growing tendency to imitate upper castes and live like them, among them. Bhagya Reddy Varma's colleague, Arigay Ramaswamy, interpreted the term 'adi-Hindu' as a signifier of Hinduness. His inclination towards Hinduization is evident from his claim that Hindu traits were shared by both dalits and non-dalits. Subsequently, he was drawn towards Gandhi and the Congress. Bhagya Reddy Varma used 'adi-Hindu' to signify the autochthonous status of dalits. He went on to convert to Buddhism, maintaining his distance from both Hinduism and mainstream politics.

By the 1930s, dalits in Andhra had come under the influence of Ambedkar and began to organize themselves. Around this time, Gandhi's 'harijan uplift' (harijanodharana) movement too gathered momentum and Harijan Seva Sanghams [Harijan Service Societies] were set up. They took up activities like sweeping dalit hamlets, and

campaigning against meat and liquor consumption. Soon enough, their practice revealed the true extent of their love for dalits. Notwithstanding their rhetoric of Harijan upliftment, their practice was never rid of caste prejudice. A number of incidents offer evidence of the double standards of such reformist initiatives. For instance, a dalit graduate was denied a place in a school committee that already had (upper-caste) Seva Sangham members. Dalits in an Anantapur district village were prevented from drawing water from the village pond and even threatened with social boycott if they crossed their limits. That incident was featured in the film *Malapilla* [Untouchable Girl, directed by Gudavalli Ramabrahmam, 1938].

The year 1930 witnessed the beginnings of dalit journalism. Journals like Kusuma Dharmanna's *Jayabheri* and S. Murthy's *Navajeevana* brought to light atrocities committed against dalits across the state. They also exposed the insincerity with which the Gandhian Harijanodharana programme was implemented.

Even as the ongoing harijan welfare programme inspired dalit activism, the leadership of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha gave shape to an autonomous movement that was founded on the aspirations of dalits. These efforts received a boost with Ambedkar's tour of Andhra in 1944.

Dalit leadership stated in no uncertain terms that Independence did not mean freedom from white masters alone but also from the rule of the black overlords; it meant liberation from caste oppression, untouchability and humiliation.

Before and after Independence, the movement had a considerable impact on the lives of dalits. Vemula Kurmaiah, B.S. Murthy, Kusuma Dharmanna and other Adi-Andhra Mahasabha leaders emphasized the need for education. Their efforts paved the way for the emergence of the first generation of dalit graduates, lawyers and government employees.

It is impossible to pass judgements on the literature and journalistic values of an earlier generation of leaders, like Bhagya Reddy Varma, Kusuma Dharmanna, Jalaranga Swamy, B.S. Murthy and Vemula Kurmaiah, by imposing on them the standards and expectations of the present. In terms of courage and defiance, these writers' contributions are second to none. Their political work and literature reflected the aspirations of dalits of another time and context. We can also see that the dalit movement and literary movements walked hand in hand. Ever since those early days, dalit leaders and writers have been indistinguishable from each other.

While the national movement opposed colonialism from above, the dalit movement waged a battle from below against various forms of oppression. Independence followed. A remarkable Constitution came next, declaring that its mandate was to grant freedom and equality to everyone. India's first elected government, headed by Nehru, announced that it would overcome every obstacle to dedicate itself to 'development'.

Dr B.R. Ambedkar warned that we were entering a world of contradictions, with a Constitution founded on democratic principles and politics, pitted against a society centred on feudal relations.

The Constitution made provisions for providing opportunities for the progress of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The practice of untouchability in any form was made a punishable offence. The education and economic development of backward sections of society in general, and dalits in particular, were now the responsibility of the State.

When we carefully examine the most progressive aspects of the Indian Constitution, we see that these are traceable to struggles waged by Ambedkar and the dalits. However, from the moment of Independence the contradiction between dalit aspirations and the ruling caste order was re-articulated as the contradiction between the democratic promise of the Constitution and upper-caste politics. The upper castes that had dominated civil society returned as national leaders and government representatives. There is no need to doubt the sincerity with which they vowed to realize the promise of the Constitution. But the interests of the castes they represented were in direct conflict with the promise of the Constitution. Betrayals and breaking of vows were inevitable.

Post-Independence Telugu country was witness to a major social transformation. Relations between castes changed as some groups rose rapidly. Till around this time, brahmin and vaisya castes were the most influential sections of society. Their cultural hegemony (samskritika adhipatyam) was hitherto unchallenged. But their domination decreased as a result of anti-brahmin and anti-caste movements in Andhra and neighbouring states. Non-brahmin peoples were also attracted to communist and peasant movements. Kamma, velama, reddy, raju, kapu and other non-brahmin castes grew strong. New sections now gained control over land. Landlordism, not cultural domination, acquired pre-eminence in determining social relationships in the countryside. Landowning castes extended their domination over dalits and also service and artisanal castes, like sale [weavers], chakali [washerfolk], kummari [potters] and mangali [barbers]. Their hold over the village strengthened and, with it, their influence in state politics too. The new ruling castes—those that grew powerful in the post-Independence period—have been responsible for atrocities on dalits as well as their economic exploitation in the decades since Independence. Other backward sections too have been subjected to their arrogant displays of power.

According to the 1991 Census, among the 665.08 lakh population of the state, 105.92 lakh (15 per cent) belong to the scheduled castes. According to Muralidhara Rao Commission's estimate of backward castes in 1984, while sixty scheduled castes constituted 15 per cent of the population, another 44.5 per cent belonged to ninety-three

other backward castes. Kammas were 3 per cent, brahmins and vaisyas around 5 per cent and reddys 9 per cent of the population. However, with their increased access to power and resources, kammas and reddys, who are a mere 12 per cent of the population, were in total control of state politics. They constituted the leadership of all major political parties, including the communist parties. The more recently formed Telugu Desam Party (TDP) has been, and continues to be, a party of the kammas. In terms of land ownership, this 12 per cent has in its hands 63 per cent of cultivable land.

Independent India failed to fulfil the crucial promises that the nation made to dalits. Their subjugation only deepened and the fruits of Independence proved to be unreachable. Violence committed by the new rich classes was ever on the rise. Dalit aspirations were routinely crushed under the weight of atrocities.

That is the background to Kanchikacherla Kotesu's immolation, the social ferment, conflict and betrayal.

The incident inspired a great deal of literature. Every poet, writer and journalist who ever wielded a pen in support of the oppressed has written Kanchikacherla Kotesu's name. To this day, Kotesu inspires dalit poets and writers.

It would be a historic blunder not to mention C.V. [Cittajallu Varahala Rao, popularly known as CV]. Even before the Digambara poets of this period (the mid-1960s), his writings ripped to shreds the caste system's obscurantism. Like Phule's materialist reinterpretations of [Hindu] mythology, CV too went about his work of reframing Telugu literary heritage with great clarity. His *Satyakama Jabaali* continues to be inspiring even today. His writings came at a time when the Communist Party of India had suspended the Telangana armed struggle, and progressive poets migrated en masse to the film industry. The prevailing opinion then was that Telugu literature had achieved 'purity' by getting rid of obsolete Sanskrit expressions. This state of complacency was disrupted by CV's 'Karuchitaklo Kanti Rekha' [A Ray of Light in the Deadly Darkness]. And thus the stage was set for the arrival of the Digambara poets.

On the societal front, although Ambedkar-inspired youth associations were active, the 'attractions' of Congress slogans kept most dalits within the party's sphere of influence. Thus, there was a movement, but it had serious limitations. Kanchikacherla Kotesu's killing, however, jolted dalit society. Within just months of the murder, the Naxalite movement erupted. In Andhra Pradesh, the movement's flame was fuelled by dalit participation. In spite of the absence of a dalit leadership in the struggles inspired by Naxalbari, the overwhelming majority of the participants were dalits and adivasis.

When we narrate the history of dalit struggles, we cannot ignore the agitations led by the Communist Party or the Naxalbari-inspired battles that followed. The intensity of the Naxalite struggle, coupled with the absence of a movement that forcefully articulated dalit aspirations, brought the dalit movement to a temporary standstill. Jashuva was, and

remains, the one writer whose work voiced—in defiance of the best-known pandits and poets, and far more expressively than any of their writings—dalit aspirations. Jashuva's *Gabbilam* [The Bat] is the manifesto that dalits never had.

By 1985, when the Telugu Desam Party was in power in the state, caste antagonisms had reached hitherto unprecedented levels. Dalit disaffection was growing alongside the sense of self-respect. Dissatisfaction was also growing against a seriously compromised dalit leadership and the caste-blind 'class consciousness' of the Left.

And then, in Karamchedu village on 17 July 1985 …

Fertile lands were watered with blood. Death danced—with knives, axes and crowbars—to the beat of the laughter of upper-caste arrogance. Kamma lords slaughtered dalits, injured women, raped them. Incredibly enough, all this was the result of one dalit's attempt to prevent a buffalo from being washed in a pond whose water his people drank. The hatred against dalits' growing sense of self-respect was the backdrop. As was the opposition to their education and the arrogant upper-caste insistence that everyone remain forever in their pre-assigned places.

Around the time of this event, when the VIRASAM line had emerged as a mainstream approach to literature, the dalit cultural activist and singer Masterji's Dalit Kalamandali was already active. Masterji had written a number of songs related to diverse aspects of dalit life. But the influence of the radical Left cultural front Jana Natya Mandali and its leading poet and singer Gaddar was at its peak. In the dalit movement, there was a leadership group consisting of, among others, Petti Kannamaraju, Perli Bhushanam and Vamanadasu. There was also an obscure organization called 'Dalit Mahasabha'. When the Karamchedu massacre happened, that organization assumed the leadership of the struggle. But the new development was that Bojja Tharakam, from the civil liberties movement, Salagala Rajasekhar who was with the Congress, and Katti Padma Rao, a member of the Rationalists' Association and Sanskrit lecturer at Ponnuru College, joined the struggle. So did some forty-eight youths from the mala hamlet of Tellajadban Chirala and youngsters from the madiga hamlets in the neighbouring areas, along with both mala and madiga caste youths from Ponnuru and Tenali towns. The result was the beginning of a dalit movement that spoke in a voice strikingly different in tone from the earlier ones.

The Karamchedu struggle made its very own Dalit Mahasabha, earlier run by Perli Bhushanam and others. A camp was established in Chirala for victims. Public meetings and protest demonstrations were held. Across the state—indeed in every single district—the Karamchedu slogans rang out. Hundreds of thousands of dalits responded to the *Chalo Chirala* [March to Chirala] call on 1 September 1985. This was followed by a dharna in Delhi in October. On 10 September, Salagala Rajasekhar and Katti Padma Rao, who by then were leading the movement, were arrested (they were later released

on bail on 30 October). The Dalit Mahasabha was reconstituted on 6 November 1985, with Bojja Tharakam as president and Katti Padma Rao as general secretary.

This was a Dalit Mahasabha that had on its agenda a number of questions raised by the Karamchedu massacre. The incident can be said to be a major turning point for the dalit movement in Andhra. Its reverberations were felt across parties and ongoing struggles. Developments in the dalit movement led to a debate in the Left. Political movements had to remake their images in the wake of Karamchedu.

Gaddar of the Jana Natya Mandali wrote 'Dalita Pululamma' [Dalit Tigers], the song that was used in all subsequent dalit struggles. Kalekuri Prasad wrote *Karamchedu Oggu Katha* [The Ballad of Karamchedu]. The incident inspired many other poets and artists too.

Katti Padma Rao's role as the movement's legendary orator is particularly memorable. Having crafted public speaking into a fine art, he went from village to village, making speeches that touched the hearts of dalits. It is no coincidence that both the key leaders of the dalit movement, Katti Padma Rao and Bojja Tharakam, were poets. The movement-inspired poetry Katti Padma Rao wrote after Karamchedu is very different from the poetry he wrote before it. Indeed, his earlier poetry comes across as a pale and weak imitation of Sri Sri. There is, of course, no denying that Sri Sri and VIRASAM influenced him and other poets of the pre-Karamchedu period.

Under Padma Rao's leadership, a new crop of organizers emerged. The evolving leadership in the districts was capable of facing up to hardships and making sacrifices. In addition, the Amedkarite youth associations made the call and agenda of the Dalit Mahasabha their own.

In 1989, when members of the raju caste attacked the dalits of Pippara village, West Godavari district, and in 1990, when malas, madigas and members of thirteen backward castes were socially boycotted in Timmasamudram, Prakasam district, the Dalit Mahasabha led major agitations.

The Dalit Mahasabha then splintered—for no good reason. One doesn't know what else the dalit movement learnt from the Naxalite movement, but it learnt rather too well the tendency to break up into splinter groups without any political differences or a real reason: simply on the basis of disagreements between individuals.

The Dalit Mahasabha factions were dormant after the split—limiting themselves to token meetings and making speeches—until August 1991, when the reddys of Chunduru carried out the infamous Chunduru slaughter. Post Karamchedu, the movement had made a number of promises centred on the twin agendas of self-protection and economic welfare. Rather than growing into a proactive movement that worked towards the fulfilment of those promises, the Dalit Mahasabha had become reactive and limited

itself to protests against atrocities. A movement thrown up by the big issues in modern dalit life was thus reduced to organizing ad hoc agitations. Little wonder then that we speak of the Karamchedu and Chunduru protests as if they were movements in and of themselves. After the 1991 Chunduru incident, the dalit movement gathered momentum again. Youth Congress member A.Y. Prabhudas, Vinay Kumar of the Marxist Communist Party of India [MCPI, the breakaway group of CPI (M) led by Omkar], and B.M. Leela Kumari, Taragopi and Subba Rao—all of whom were working with All-India Catholic Universities Federation and went on to become key organizers of the Chunduru movement—had met Katti Padma Rao on earlier occasions.

At around this time, members of the Naxalite-affiliated Left cultural organizations, including VIRASAM members B.S. Ramulu, I. Ramachandrayya and Sahu, as also Oo Sa (U. Sambasiva Rao) and others working in Janashakti, began infusing their writings with a dalit consciousness. K.G. Satyamurthy, former secretary of People's War, who inaugurated the VIRASAM trend in poetry and grew famous under the pseudonym 'Sivasagar', moved into what we may call the dalit camp. Chunduru proved to be an inspiration for a great deal of poetry, essays and other forms of literature.

However, the synergy between writers and the movement had been lost. The movement went its way and writers went about their work regardless of it. Katti Padma Rao was prolific as a writer but he was neither a part of the dalit literary movement nor did he try to contribute to it. The formation of the Dalita Rachayita Sangham [Dalit Writers' Association] was announced, but it did no work. A number of writers whose work was already informed by a dalit consciousness did not become a part of this association. Subsequently, B.S. Ramulu, Sahu, Masterji, Oo Sa and others established the Dalita Rachiyitala, Kalakarula, Medhavula Aikya Vedika [United Front of Dalit Writers, Performers and Intellectuals]. Kancha Ilaiah's contribution to this effort cannot be overstated. However, the United Front soon came to be a dysfunctional entity, partly due to the irreparable loss caused by Sahu's untimely death.

In 1993–94 the dalit literary movement peaked. The writers' meet in Kodada showed much promise. In its wake, Lakshmi Narsaiah came into the limelight to make an impressive contribution. Till the death of Tripuraneni Srinivas, who was himself of kamma origin, the *Andhra Jyothi* newspaper was a regular forum for dalit writers. While Tripuraneni Srinivas was alive, Lakshmi Narsaiah's essays on dalit literature and writers were published serially in the newspaper. With the arrival on the scene of a new crop of writers, like Satish Chandar, Yendluri Sudhakar, Pydi Theresh Babu, Madduri Nagesh Babu and others, dalit expression became sharper. Such was the power of their expression that even Sivasagar, whose VIRASAM-style poetry had already gained him recognition as a great poet, came under its influence. Katti Padma Rao's post-Chunduru work can be said to have been influenced by these poets. Compilations published from

Nalgonda, notably *Bahuvachanam* [The Plural/Plurality] and *Meme* [It's Us], elevated dalit literature to new heights. The most remarkable contribution of the Nalgonda poets was to ensure that dalit poetry remained sharp, fresh and alive. The literary movement kept the dalit question alive at a time when the dalit movement itself was on the retreat.

Soon, there came a point when there was no longer any overlap in the agendas of the dalit movement and the dalit literary movement. Contrary to its historic mandate, its initial promise and tremendous potential to emerge as a comprehensive literary and cultural movement, dalit writing confined itself to prose poetry (vachana kavitvam). It was weakened by the debilitating individualism of its authors. Story, novel and autobiography remained undeveloped forms. It failed to reach out to oral forms that were thriving beyond the dalit movement's immediate sphere of influence. Literary criticism was reduced to lavishing praise and passing prejudiced judgements. Along with Lakshmi Narsaiah, a host of dalit leaders, poets and writers have to own responsibility for this development.

Around this time, the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti [MRPS] came to the forefront. It argued that while injustice was done to all dalits in society, the madiga caste had been oppressed further because members of the mala castes had cornered the benefits of reservation. There was an agitation demanding that the quota of reserved positions should be further classified into ABCD categories to reflect socio-economic differences among dalits castes. In the past, Sadalakshmi of the Congress and BJP leader Venkataswamy were among those who had demanded the sub-classification of scheduled castes for the purposes of reservation. A.Y. Prabhudas, Nagarajunacharya, Ponugoti Krupakar Madiga, Sandeti Prabhakar and others had also questioned the poor representation of madigas in the leadership of the dalit movement.

The demand for sub-classification gained strength under the leadership of Krishna Madiga, who had earlier worked in Satyamurthy's group, and Krupakar Madiga, the former Guntur district secretary of the Dalit Mahasabha (and a member of the Janasakthi before that). Madigas from across the state approved of their leadership. Hundreds of thousands of madiga people claimed them as their own. Since the demand was just, a broad spectrum of democratic forces extended their support to the movement.

The very same dalit leaders who had earlier argued forcefully that the oppressed were not an undifferentiated mass, but had a face and a caste, and also went on to build a movement that addressed itself to the problem of and solution to caste oppression, were startled when the madigas confronted them with the very same questions that they had originally formulated. 'Dalit' had become a static, abstract term, emptied of its usefulness and political charge. The movement's mala leaders refused to accept the fact that dalits themselves belonged to different castes. Or that each dalit caste faced

miseries that were uniquely its own, calling for context-specific solutions. The madiga leadership responded to this denial by focusing its attack on malas.

Poets inspired by the madiga movement wrote fantastic poetry. Yendluri Sudhakar and Nagappagari Sunderraju, among others, wrote good poetry, poetry which reflected the hopes and aspirations of the movement. Sunderraju's short stories were widely circulated.

Many who had gained recognition as dalit poets were now divided into camps of mala and madiga poets. They failed to fulfil their mandate as *dalit* poets. When Dandora made its demand, there was some concern among malas that their access to education and jobs would be affected. These poets should have announced their support for the madiga demand and gone on to convince the anxious malas of its justness. Mala caste poets were unsuccessful in reinforcing the dalit consciousness of the mala people. Poets from the madiga caste failed to convince the agitated madigas that the malas were not the oppressor. In the villages, the pathetic failure of the dalit poets resulted in malas and madigas confronting each other like enemies. Mala Mahanadu was born with the sole objective of opposing Madiga Dandora. Mala Mahanadu too disintegrated into factions.

Soon enough, the leadership of Madiga Dandora too splintered, like that of Dalit Mahasabha in the past. Once again, there was no major political difference among the leaders, only personal differences.

Today, hundreds of thousands of malas and madigas continue to be mobilized, but atrocities on dalits and newer forms of untouchability and discrimination continue unabated. The Madiga Dandora movement became limited to the sub-classification demand. The brutal killings of dalits in Vempenta did not spark any significant protests. Mala Mahanadu, whose very genesis is an aberration of dalit consciousness, did nothing when two mala youths were awarded death penalty. It did not respond even when Tota Trimurtulu, then a TDP leader from East Godavari district, had mala youngsters tonsured. To this day, many mala hamlets live without land and protection, in fear and subject to humiliation. Mala Mahanadu did not do a thing for them.

Madiga Dandora ignored all other problems faced by madigas. It was wrong to make reservation the single focus of the movement at a time when the government and public sector were themselves in a state of flux. Nevertheless, the questions raised by Madiga Dandora were exceedingly important. Every passing day reasserts the need for the dalit movement to forge ahead as a unified front, with a comprehensive set of demands covering all aspects of dalit life.

Dalit Political Movement

From day one, the ruling parties have systematically enticed and engulfed dalit society's leadership into the fold of the establishment. Leave alone the leaders who were elected in reserved constituencies but remained loyal servants of their feudal lords, the entire leadership that emerged from the dalit movement was lured and entrapped by ruling parties.

Efforts continue to be made to develop the movement as an alternative to the mainstream ruling parties and their politics of domination. The Scheduled Castes Association, the Republican Party and activists like Bojja Appalaswami and Anand Babu have been working for many decades now. But their impact on the struggle to capture political power is negligible. Katti Padma Rao's Peda Prajala Party [Poor People's Party] experiment was a terrible failure. Although the Bahujan Samaj Party had been set up quite some time ago, it was after 1994, when it formed the government in Uttar Pradesh, that it created a storm. At one stage it appeared close to capturing power in the state—such was the influence of Kanshi Ram here. But then the leaders sold out and the party's weak hold in the countryside and inexperience led to the failure of this effort too.

The Bahujan Republican Party, established by Satyamurthy after he quit the BSP, had only a limited impact. The splinter group led by Parvathy and Gautam too had little influence. Underscoring the need for a comprehensive and unified dalit political movement, the Mahajan Front was formed with Krishna Madiga as its president. However, even before it could begin functioning, its leaders began their bickering. Clearly, no lessons had been learnt from the BSP experiment. Apart from the announcement—like the vidushak's, at the end of a play—that a unified front of the oppressed was necessary for the benefit of humankind, the Mahajan Front left nothing behind. The failure of the dalit political movement lies in its incapacity to recognize that a coalition is always between social forces and not just an agreement between individuals.

In order for dalits in the villages to vote freely and independently, their subservience has to end. For subservience to end, dalits have to have access to land and develop economically. The onward flow of real political power is dammed by the bunds demarcating agricultural lands.

As long as land relations remain unchanged, no political movement can be successful. The dalit movement should treat the history of the kamma caste's rise to power as a valuable primer in politics.

We notice that the dalit movement, in its pursuit of political power, has ignored all other struggles. The movement has to be informed by the awareness that unless dalits participate in struggles for land, self-respect, food and dignity, they are in the danger of

regressing politically. It is imperative for the movement to march ahead on the strength of such struggles. That attempt is yet to begin.

At the Crossroads

Today, the dalit movement and the dalit literary movement stand at an unusual intersection, leading us to unsolved problems in the lives of dalits. They include:

1. Right to land and decent living wages;
2. Right to natural resources that provide livelihood;
3. Dalit women's right to equality;
4. Right to reservations in education and jobs; and
5. Right to life, including the right to protection from oppression.

These have to be integrated into a comprehensive action plan while building the movement. Further, dalit women's liberation movement is yet to gain strength. Apart from the malas and madigas, no other dalit caste's problems have featured on the movement's agenda. The smaller dalit castes have to be integrated into a movement that marches ahead with the goal of capturing political power. A leadership driven by collective aspirations has to be created.

Unity among oppressed castes cannot be reduced to making deals between individuals. Instead, a leadership that is truly representative of collectives has to emerge.

The implementation of land reforms, protection of the system of reservations, representation in education and employment, and the abolition of all forms of untouchability apart, safety, dignity and self-respect are to be the basis of a political movement in order for it to be successful.

While dalit women poets like Challapalli Swaroopa Rani and Jajula Gowri have gained prominence, the dalit feminist movement needs to broaden its framework to include the innumerable dalit women poets of the countryside and their creative expressions.

Suggestions to Dalit Writers

- A dalit writer should function like the permanent opposition to seats of authority; s/he is also the dissenter who offers constructive criticism of the dalit movement's political leadership.
- S/he should work towards the development of literary forms, like the short story, novel and autobiography, and not focus on free verse alone.

- Realize that it is not an individual's image, but the reputation of a collective that is the source of an individual's fame and prestige.
- When movements, such as Dandora, cause a rift between dalit castes, the mandate of dalit poets and writers is mediation, not incitement and overreaction.
- Get used to the idea of working under a collective leadership, rather than that of individuals.
- Learn from the Marathi dalit movement.
- The Marathi dalit movement won great victories and was eventually defeated, not through repression, but with applause, titles and praise. Internalize the lesson of that defeat.
- Build a collectively run publication enterprise.
- Criticism—self-criticism: that's the way to move ahead. (Vimarsa—atma vimarsa: aa vidhamga munduku nadavali.)
- In addition to according recognition to existing authors, encourage everyone who can hold a pen.
- Encourage the numerous women writers who remain nameless. Prepare to be led by them.
- Seek out newer literary forms.
- It is late, but the darkness has not yet surrounded us.
- The future belongs to the generation that refuses to surrender.
- Let us stamp the dalit imprint on time.

Pydi Theresh Babu

Pydi Theresh Babu was born in 1963 in Gaddalagunta, a mala neighbourhood in the town of Ongole, Prakasam district. His father, Pydi Santhaiah, was a carpenter, and mother, Subbulu, an agricultural worker. There are stories waiting to be written about the first time he went to school. He joined late—in 1974, when he was already eleven. 'We got upma and Modern bread for lunch. I had never eaten those things before. I did not have a slate, so I wrote on the floor.' His best memories are associated with the plays that one of his teachers, Yesudas, used to stage every Christmas. 'My grandfather was a very good singer of christupatalu [hymns]. He used to sing other songs too; we had a strong culture in the family of music and song. Each year, I played different roles in these plays: a boy, a shepherd, a wise man, King Herod. And I would be the one to sing the lullaby as Mary rocked the infant Jesus to sleep. So my connection with the microphone and with singing goes back to those early years in school,' he notes. Moving quickly through elementary school—he jumped classes—Theresh took his seventh class state board exams in 1977 (in which he stood first in the district) and graduated to high school. He received some prize money and a certificate—and promptly donated the money to the relief work in Diviseema, a small island in Krishna district (hit by a terrible cyclone that year). Meanwhile, he had been writing poems and taking part in district-level competitions. In 1977, he participated in an inter-school competition in Hyderabad and won a prize for his poem 'Vennela'. He had written it out as was his practice, very neatly, by hand. Encouraged by this success, Theresh felt emboldened to show a whole sheaf of his poems, similarly written by hand, to his Hindi teacher, Emani Dayananda. The teacher, who was standing near the school pond, flung the poems aside and they fell into the water. 'I lost some of them. It took me a very long time to recover from the shock of that experience.' But there was also support and encouragement. A cousin lent his volumes of Gunturu Seshendra Sharma's poetry and got Theresh a membership in the district library. He could read there, and also take books home. 'Some years later, in 1981, encouraged by my friend Alapati Vivekananda, I managed to take part in a poets' meet. When I got there, I found that the judge was the very teacher who had flung my poems into the pond. I read out my poem with trepidation. The applause was heart-warming. The joint collector, Mr Samuel, who chaired the meeting, also singled it out for praise. There was little that Dayananda Saar could do!'

At home, there was very little money. Young Theresh often went with his mother to work in the fields. She would earn five rupees a day, and he (a boy) seven. Once, he recalls, 'a landlord was trying to molest a dalit girl who was returning from the tank carrying water. We heard her shouts for help. The others hesitated. "If you go to her aid, you won't get your wage," they warned.' He went all the same. Their region was well known for its natakalu (a kind of dance drama) performances. Between January and May (lean agricultural periods), there was money to be earned from these shows and the family would participate, earning fifty rupees for an evening. 'Even if the tenth-class exam was scheduled for the day next to the evening of the show, I would be performing,' he says, adding, 'I passed the SSLC examination with a first class.'

Theresh Babu began publishing his poems and short stories under the pen-name 'Pydisri.' It was a way of avoiding his Christian-sounding name and ensuring that his work got published by everyone—which it did. He would sometimes overhear his classmates and teachers discuss his work (without knowing that he was the poet). Then *Andhra Bhoomi* weekly published an introductory piece with his picture and some stories and poems. As a result, Theresh Babu says, two things happened: 'My identity was exposed, and I found a special fan, who later became my wife. She is a Muslim from the Telangana region and knows Telugu well. She is one of my best critics,' he says, smiling.

In 1985, he joined Amruthavani, a media centre run by a Catholic group. They started him off on a monthly salary of Rs 500. 'I can get more than this working in the fields at home,' he thought, but joined all the same. Within a month, he was head of the audio-visual department. The very next year, he went to the Philippines for further training. During the five years he worked in Amruthavani, Theresh obtained an MA from Osmania University (studying between five and seven in the evening) and also took courses in Carnatic music at Telugu University and diploma in audio-visual media from Sonalooks Asia (Philippines). 'It was an important period of personal enrichment,' he says. 'I continued to compose, made short films. My natural ability received a classical extension.'

In 1990, he joined All India Radio (AIR) as an announcer and moved to Kothagudem, where he lived for the next five years. That was a turning point in his life. He read widely: Ambedkar, Marx, Hindu philosophy. He was able to buy books, study, discuss and think things over. Then in 1993, Madduri Nagesh Babu became a colleague. 'The interaction and the discussions we had in Kothagudem are unforgettable. One of the first things Madduri said was: "Abandon that Pydisri disguise. Why are you in hiding? Write as Pydi Theresh Babu [a name that would declare his caste as well as his religion]." Discussions with Madduri, and with Tripuraneni Srinivas and G. Lakshmi Narasaiah, helped me come up with a specific world view,' Pydi says. 'The first poem written in

my own name, "Alpapeedanam" was published in 1993. The other important poem was a response to an incident of atrocity in Kurnool district. A dalit woman, Sajjalagudem Mahadevamma, was raped and the *Udayam* daily tucked it into the section for news that had "arrived late". I wrote "Kukka KarichinaVaarta" [News of a Dog Bite]. This made two things happen: one, it brought a basavi into literature and, two, the collector took note of the incident and helped the woman,' Pydi told us.

'We put together a collection called *Nishani* [mark; also thumbprint, as against signature] in1995. It was a tiny collection, carrying just four poems—one each by Khaja, Madduri Nagesh Babu, Lakshmi Narasaiah [writing as Varadaiah] and me. But it was written as a reply to a comment made by mainstream poets that "dalits are the stepchildren of society" in a small bulletin called *Santakalu* [signatures]. *Nishani* was a grand success; everyone was discussing it. Satish Chandar came out strongly against it in a review: "It is all just obscene, vulgar language [boothu]," he said. Some feminist writers also objected to the language, which they misunderstood as denigrating women.' In 1995, Pydi was transferred to AIR Hyderabad as senior grade announcer, a post he continues to hold. He married Tahira Sultana the same year. Until the mid-1990s, 'I wrote without a world view—after that it was Ambedkar's thought. I could see very clearly where I stood,' he says.

'In 1996, responding to the criticism that dalit literature does not reach dalits, I decided to draw on our oral tradition of writing long oral compositions. I wrote a long poem, *Hindu Mahasamudram*. It was widely discussed. Critics described it as a foundation stone of dalit philosophy. I was invited to Nellore to speak. The meeting was to be held in the town hall. I stopped briefly at my mother's and got a bit late. As I approached the venue, I heard my voice: they were playing my poem over the loudspeaker. Someone commented on it in a few sentences. Tears welled up in my eyes. My poem had reached my own people.

'We wanted that *Nishani* and Madduri Nagesh Babu's *Veliwada* should get attention in Hyderabad and organized a Rachchabanda in the Press Club. There was a huge turnout, and direct interaction between writers, critics and readers. Around the same time, from Hyderabad University, students were also addressing the dalit question. Kanakaiah, Koyi Koteswara Rao, Nagappagari Sunderraju and others of the Ambedkar Association brought out *Gundedappu* [The Heart's Drumbeat]. *Dalit Manifesto*,a collection with a Marxist point of view, was published in 1995. There were heated discussions about the relationship between class and caste. Satyamurthy [Sivasagar] came out with his critique of revolutionary practice. All this fed into the poetry of the time. There is no doubt that I have personally been enriched by my interaction with the Left. It was the entry of the NGOs that was a disaster. They began deciding themes, issues. I felt I had to move away.'

Then Eenadu TV (ETV) asked Pydi to write the script for a daily serial. 'My people are illiterate, I thought. It would be best if I can use a visual medium. I began to work on a commercial serial, *Sangharshana* [Conflict], which appeared every day and played out 500 episodes. I managed some kind of a disguised dalit statement—with a domestic worker and a construction worker taking on the corporate giants.' Pydi is keen on using the mainstream media to communicate dalit concerns and has also directed serials for Gemini and Zee TV. He also experimented with the audio format within AIR. The Sunday afternoon play is an important slot in AIR. Pydi wrote a satirical drama, *Chicken Masala* (which, he says is 'nothing but a dalit play'), which was broadcast in 2009 and has written and directed three other plays.

Among his publications are two collections of poetry: *Sharasandhanam* (Aiming Arrows, 1995) and *Alpapeedanam* (Depression in the Ocean, 1999); a long poem *Hindu Mahasamudram* (The Great Hindu Ocean), first as audio cassette in 1999 and then in book form in 2010; a poetic documentary *Nenu Naa Vintalamari Prapancham* (Me and My World of Wonders, 2007) and a new collection of poems, *Nalugo Prapancham* (Fourth World, 2010). He received the Mahakavi Sri Sri Award in 2001 and the AIR National Poet Award in 2007. He has more than fifty stories and several critical essays on literature yet to be published in a book form.

The Great Hindu Ocean

Translated by K. Satyanarayana[1]

The Ocean instigates
me against myself.

It creates new boundaries between those
who have been outside all boundaries.

The malas and the madigas
stood by each other
until a few moons ago.
But now they turn
and confront one another.

It is the Ocean's ardent wish
that they chop off
each other's arms.

Had the ocean not been so wily,
could it have placed a knife in my hand
and incited me against myself?

Who is SC, who ST, who BC, who minority?
Am I not all these?

One foot is still stuck in the mud.
The other sways in the wind,
desperate
to land on hard ground.
It sketches the air,
kicks itself, and sinks
into a controversy.

The Ocean incites
me against myself.
It creates new boundaries between those
who had been outside all boundaries.

*

The Ocean has occupied the prayer place.
Allah or Jesus,
no matter.
It has but one aim:
after the place of prayer is razed,
it must rise again as
the Ocean's temple.
The Ocean creates a literature of lies,

shouted through loudspeakers.
It fabricates histories of place,
and declares them the ancient structure of the Ocean.

It chops Buddhism into pieces
and piles the Buddha on as the tenth incarnation of Vishnu.

The crescent is a part of my very innards
but I am now told it is the tip of a knife.

Sprinkling a fistful of sacred ash
it conjures a holy man out
of my ignorance.
From between my vertebrae,
gold chains sprout.
Every town and every village
can now write its Patna-story.
The Ocean occupies places of prayer.
Protest is necessary
against this Ocean.
Those who protest against religion itself
must protest against this great Ocean.

Somalia, the Goat

Translated by Nagari Babaiah

It was a beautiful flowering grove.
In the grove—a goat,
a she-goat at that,
with a well-endowed body.

Her name was Somalia![2]

She had been declared the beauty of the forest and bestowed a leafy crown studded with wild berries by no less than tiger, the king.

Somalia had a male companion called Desavali.[3] He was a pure indigenous variety full of brawn, brimming with youth. He was determined to fall in love only with his own kind, never with the foreign variety. Not that there can be a distinction between native and foreign as far love is concerned. As fate should have it, Desavali fell madly in love with Somalia. He even found himself suffering the pangs of separation by humming a film song about all-consuming passion.

Somalia too felt more or less the same way. A passionate affair ensued in stealth between them.

It was a cool night! Desire was aflame. So far and yet so near; so near and yet so far.

Looking deep into Desavali's eyes, Somalia said: 'Life is passing and beauty eternal. Dearest, please bestow permanence on this impermanent world with a great philosophy of the aesthetic.'

Dribbling pseudo-intellectual saliva, Desavali queried: 'What is beauty?'

'Beauty may be hunger, thirst, an alluring sight and a frightening vision,' Somalia replied.

'No,' Desavali cut in. With the confidence of a male chauvinism combined with feminist humanism he elaborated: 'Beauty is the White House; a frozen ripple on the river Thames; a piece of half-dried dung under the debris of the Berlin Wall, the foldable cot given out on rent in the Kremlin palace, an unbroken Babri brick behind the wall of the Ram mandir and the fried nuts sold at Tiananmen Square. Beauty is also the report compiled by an NGO. Most importantly, beauty is a seminar on the eradication of poverty secretively held in a five-star hotel.'

Somalia looked away, her eyes piteous. The horizon was wounded by that look. After a pause, she said: 'Dear Desavali, I know that it is an extremely oppressive economic slavery that makes you say these things. Come closer!'

Desavali drew closer to Somalia.

Somalia's mouth watered. A flood may be stopped, but not saliva. But Somalia controlled herself. Suppressing her hunger, she smiled a benign smile. Desavali's body grew taut, his passion was rising. Despite his pride intruding between body and passion, he submitted.

'Beauty is a stomach dry with hunger. It is a stinking corpse in the middle of the road with no one to attend to it …,' Somalia continued.

‘Stop it,’ screamed Desavali in a show of frightful beauty.

He resumed: ‘Beauty is caste. Beauty is religion. Beauty is regarding caste and religion as the very breath of life at one time and calling it revolution at another. Beauty is combining all seven colours under the leadership of red and yellow and renting out an olive-green dream to the forest. Dum, Dum, Dum! DhamaDham! DhamaDhamDham!’

‘Maybe not, my love,’ said Somalia.

‘Maybe so, my love,’ said Desavali.

‘I love you.’

‘I love your beauty, but suspect your love.’

‘Tell me what lies in your heart.’

‘Tell me the secret of your beauty.’

‘I cannot express it.’

‘Neither can I.’

‘Is that all?

‘Yes, that is all.’

‘Get lost, you fool,’ said Somalia, moving westward.

‘Get lost yourself, idiot,’ said Desavali, moving eastward.

Far away an old film song could be heard: ‘Again the same evening, the same melancholy, the same loneliness …’

There is a background to this episode of two goats, madly in love, separating. This big story is not complete unless that back-story is brought into the narration.

A few days ago, the lion king had died, tricked by a rabbit into falling into a well. Power had then passed on into the claws of the tiger. The forest media announced the news from the treetops. The community of goats was shaken to its core. They demanded that a definite policy be announced about the goat community. A unique agitation was launched, wherein they munched all the leaves of the trees in the dharna chowk. They also went on a fast. Finally, King Tiger was forced to relent.

He declared: ‘From now on, we will eat only World Bank funds, not goats.’ He didn’t stop at that: ‘From now on, tigers and goats will live in a fearless atmosphere and enjoy the beauty of peaceful coexistence.’ Not stopping even at that, and overflowing with enthusiasm, he announced several cultural, social and spiritual programmes. The government machinery began immediately to implement them.

One of the events was a beauty contest for the forest goats. Goats from all over the world assembled there for it.

Spotting Somalia, the entire forest swooned. The first to recover from this state was Desavali. He fell in love all over again. Somalia was crowned Miss World. The king hosted an exclusive banquet in her honour … All this happened in quick succession.

Somalia entered the banquet hall. The tigers gave her a hearty welcome. Somalia looked around and asked: 'What's for dinner?'

Bolting the door shut, the tigers said: 'You are the dinner!'

'Are you going to eat me?' asked Somalia, with a quivering voice.

'What is life worth if we don't eat you?' said the king, pursing his lips.

'Your policy is not to eat goats, isn't it?' asked Somalia.

'We don't do what we say, and we don't say what we do. We are rulers,' said the tigers.

Somalia's life breath went up in thin air.

'Our dinner will begin with your last wish and end with our first wish. Come, sit at the table,' ordered King Tiger.

'The designs of kings are beyond the comprehension of the mass of people!' said Somalia, with a stoic smile. 'By inviting me for dinner, you gave me the shock of my life. With my humble goat devotion, let me serve you a shock too.'

'To us? You? Serve a shock?' guffawed the tigers.

'I am not a goat. I am a tiger!' announced Somalia.

The laughter stopped. Stunned, the tigers grew quiet: 'What … what?'

'Yes, I am a tiger in goatskin. I am a proud tiger now cut down to the size of a goat. Caught in the turbulence of hunger in Somalia, I grew weak and emaciated; I was blinded, reduced to a bag of bones.'

The tigers' faces fell. Their eyes grew into twice the size in horror.

'The truth is always unsavoury to rulers who go by reports of others. Hmmm … truth is like the skin. Let me peel off this skin and reveal the naked truth before you. Please take a look,' said Somalia, peeling off her own skin. She stood naked before them. The sight was like that of a corpse dug up a week after it had been buried. It was gruesome beyond description.

The eyes of one of the tigers that had witnessed this macabre sight splintered into smithereens. Two others threw up; three tigers became disgusted with life and bashed their heads in. The king lost consciousness for a good quarter of an hour.

The male tigers kneeled before Somalia and pleaded: 'Please pick up that goat skin and cover yourself right away.'

Somalia put on her goat skin and resumed her earlier beautiful appearance.

As soon as the king recovered, an emergency cabinet meeting was called. It passed a mutually beneficial secret resolution.

In essence it ran thus: 'Somalia must instantly come up with a theory of beauty. It should be so cruelly alluring that the entire goat community should glorify the rule of the tigers. Gradually they should turn themselves voluntarily into food for tigers. In return for this novel food-production process, Somalia will get benami housing sites, lands, vehicles, money and security.'

'That's all fine. But managing this in reality is like wrestling on the edge of a sword,' said Somalia, after having heard the whole declaration.

'But it's not an unearthly feat, is it?' commented King Tiger.

'I have a small suggestion,' said Somalia.

'Go on, tell me,' said the king.

'Give me permission to act as an enemy of the State to win the trust of the goats,' said Somalia.

'Oh yes! You can bombard the system day and night. You can carry on agitations, you can burn buses, you can organize roadblocks, you can attack our houses. You can do whatever you like. Not even a fly will harm you. We will arrest you here and release you there. But you should give us goats in proportion to the magnitude of your protests,' said the king.

'Sure,' said Somalia.

'May you be victorious,' said the king.

From then on, Somalia got busy formulating a unique theory of beauty. At the very start, her eyes fell on Desavali. She had been trying out the new theory of beauty on him. In Desavali, though, she met her match. He was a first-hand expert on subaltern studies. He had fantastic links with voluntary organizations. He had good experience in the movement. Voluntary surrender to the government had brought him all privileges. He had made a fortune with the patronage of real estate on the one side and the fourth estate on the other. While his engagement with the media had earned him a good name, his fondness for the bottle had ruined it. Desavali was drawn to Somalia only after the realization dawned on him that 'a woman is any day more attractive than a bottle'.

Desavali had a wonderful downloaded philosophy. The essence of it was: to be deceived in trust is hell. It is hundred times better and indeed heavenly to know the situation for what it is and play along. However, a question remained like an 'unsolved mystery' in his mind: 'How did the hunger-ravaged Somalia turn out to be such a striking beauty?'

Desavali made a strict resolution to keep his longing for Somalia under check until the mystery was solved. He wrote down this resolution and carried it always in his pocket.

*

It was a lovely moonlit night that seemed bathed in snow.

There was a transparent green flowering bush.

Somalia was writhing in hunger.

Desavali was burning in the throes of passion.

Gazing at the moon, which hung in the sky like a mushroom without a stem, Somalia began singing: 'You are the moon in the sky … I am the dust on earth!'

Desavali was her match. He began to sing too: 'Are you the one who thought of me … are you the one who beckoned to me?'

Somalia stopped and looked at Desavali, mesmerized.

'Why did you stop singing? Please don't disrupt my joy of swimming in the soft waves of your alluring music. Come, let us make our music immortal in the presence of the god of beauty.'

Somalia began: 'Let me sing praises of the lord …'

'What melody! What depth! What beauty! What philosophy!' whispered Desavali, his eyes half closed.

Falling on Desavali, Somalia sang: 'I got you, you're mine … I caught you, you are mine, my darling …'

Desavali suddenly opened his eyes and asked: 'Tell me really, what is beauty?'

That was it. The story went back to square one.

Pretending she was setting her hair right, Somalia thumped her head with her fist, realizing that there was no escape; she'd have to answer. So she had no choice but to speak. 'Beauty is an ancient form of slavery. It is liberty in bondage, a liberal slavery. Blind to the visible world, you search for answers in an unseen world. Beauty is winning over an ignorance of one kind and replacing it with a gift of blindness of another kind.'

'No!' said Desavali.

Putting out the flames of her hunger temporarily with drops of saliva, Somalia asked: 'What then do you mean by beauty?'

‘Change is worldly; the principles of change other-worldly. The path is physical; the goal metaphysical. Beauty is the unseen that determines what is seen. Turning life into words, time into hours and auctioning every minute, as in the corporate world, is beauty. Prostituting fidelity, changing a woman every hour and a man every half an hour, is beauty. Beauty is clutching Russia in the fist, while carrying America in a fist-sized heart. Beauty is taking out the heart from under the skin in public, and putting it into a noose secretly,’ said Desavali.

‘You are of one kind and I of another. What can I do?’ wondered Somalia.

‘You are salt and I am cinder. What do I do?’ Desavali responded.

‘Can you not stop your rant and mad philosophical chatter?’ Somalia asked.

‘It is you who should put an end to your fossilized romantic nonsense!’

‘To marry business and belief is not as easy as stringing together a rhyme.’

‘Losing and gaining are not as easy as inhaling and exhaling.’

‘Is our union then nothing but a dream?’ asked Somalia, pining.

‘If we are to be united, our theories of beauty should also be united. For the last and final time, tell me without coming up with any of that garbage, tell me, what is beauty?’ Desavali pressed.

‘Then you must hear me out. Your own intestines feeling strongly for you is beauty. Beauty is your own heart beating hard for you. Reaching your own self, having crossed the binaries of all ups and downs, is beauty. Why bother with all these thousand rants, you crazy man-beast? Beauty is nothing but one’s own self, residing under one’s own skin. That’s all,’ said Somalia, revealing her genuine theory of beauty.

That was it!

Suddenly Desavali embraced Somalia. Not with love, but with fear.

Reason for the fear?

In reality, Desavali did not exist under his own skin. Countries like America, England, New Zealand, Australia, China, Japan and Germany lived there. He feared that Somalia might discover this truth.

After all, the only ploy that can hide fear is love, isn’t it? That was why he had declared unconditional love for Somalia.

Something like a sudden spurt of trust in the butcher just before being beheaded blossomed in Desavali. He walked with Somalia. You know and I know the consequences of this trust. Somalia knows it too.

Who knows when Desavali will wake up to this!

Finally, beauty is marching on in the hope of being able to trick each other every time.

The End!

Joopaka Subhadra

Since her family remembers that Joopaka Subhadra was born the year Nehru died, she knows it must have been 1964. She was born in Bellampalli, in Adilabad district, in her eldest brother's home. Her father lived in Damaranchapally in Warangal district. 'We were twelve children—and I was the eleventh and the only one amongst us to study. My father owned thirty acres of land, but despite that, his life was a madiga life. A reddy with ten acres felt superior to him and could order him around,' Subhadra observes.

She says this about her early life: 'I grew up in my brother's home. Even as a small child, I did a lot of housework. I would wake up early, do my homework, then between six and eight, I would scrub the pots and pans from the night's meal, clean and chop the vegetables and help feed my nieces—all before I went to school. I worked hard at my studies too. I wanted always to be first in every subject; I wanted the teacher to look at me and smile. If I missed a day at school, the others told me that the teacher was "mood off". All the same, my brother wanted to marry me off when I was ten. My father refused. He said to me, "You are the only one among my children to study; keep focused. Don't let anything distract you." He moved me to a social welfare hostel.' The story translated here is about life in one such hostel.

'Neither in school, nor in college did I ever find an image of myself in what I was reading or being taught. I did not find my language, my culture, my food, my family in any books. There are so many key differences between our culture and upper-caste culture. Our bullock cart is not the same as a reddy bullock cart. His is comfortable, designed for him and his family to ride in; ours is made for collecting manure. They call the river that runs past the village Godavari. We call it Ganga. That is not all. The important people and especially the scientists were all men. I lost faith in God very early—in class eight. There was a cyclone—it destroyed many temples. If there were gods, they should have stopped that. Why did the gods not save themselves, I asked myself.'

In 1979, Subhadra finished school and joined AVV College in Warangal. She had wanted to become a scientist or a doctor, but she could not get into the science stream. So she ended up doing History, Civics and Economics. But the more important thing to happen to her was that in college she joined the Progressive Democratic Students' Union (PDSU). 'Their motto was "study and struggle"—and I understood through them what it meant to think and act politically. I read a lot of history—about Nehru, Gandhi,

people's struggles; I understood that this society must change. Unfortunately, we never had the chance to read Ambedkar. I was told that this education was useless—but I did not agree!' says Subhadra.

She says that she also worried about why she did not find it easy to join caste struggles, about what had alienated her from her context, her experience and her people. She also raised other questions: 'I found women were always treasurers in PDSU—never secretary or president. I asked why. In response they offered to make me president, but I refused. Everyone criticized me for raising such frivolous issues—but women are no longer only treasurers in the organization! Around that time, women's wings were set up in the party [CPI-ML]. But they were controlled by educated "hi-fi" women. When there was a meeting, these women would be well looked after. They would stay in hotels, in people's houses and so on. Dalit and BC women slept in tents.'

Then in 1994, Subhadra attended the Fifth National Conference of Women's Movements in Tirupati as part of the Progressive Organization of Women (POW) delegation. 'There they pushed us forward saying "you speak, you speak". Until then we had no separate identity, but suddenly we were being asked to speak as "dalit mahila". We saw that it was important to do so and tried, but the question was diverted by a strong lesbian group raising the sexuality issue. There were so many different strands: ML women, CPM women, family women, women against the family. I felt happy with our simple desire to be together and understood that we do have different things to say. But even in Tirupati, the upper-caste women came in cars, we walked or went in buses. We shouted the slogans, but the next morning, theirs were the pictures printed in the papers.'

Subhadra traces her life as a writer back to her schooldays when she used to write stories about her friends for their entertainment. Her first published piece was a letter to the editor of the Telugu daily, *Udayam*. She also wrote a critical review of a radio programme in the PDSU souvenir. The story 'Shuddi Cheyali', published in 2000 in *Bhumika*, was included in the souvenir. 'It was based on my experience of being asked to vacate a rented house when they learnt about my caste. I also wrote about my experiences in the dalit diary of *Sakshi* edited by Kalekuri Prasad, in *Udyoga Kranti*, *Bhumika*, *Telangana Soyi* and bigger dailies like *Andhra Jyothi*, *Vartha* and *Surya*.'

In PDSU, there was a lot of literary discussion about craft, about character, narrative, ending and so on, which she says she did not find useful. 'This is not my literature, though it claims to represent me, I felt. Mine is orature, not literature. It is in the orature that I find my language, the contexts in which we lived. I like the work of B.S. Ramulu, Allam Rajaiah, or Tadi Nagamma.' While she was in PDSU, she says, she did not write. 'Even if I had written it would not have been published. It would just have been criticized. In the party, men, state leaders, spoke—even about gender politics. If I raised

a question about it, I was looked on as a renegade. To speak about gender from my experience was unthinkable.'

All the same, she read a lot. When Stree Shakti Sanghatana's *Manaku Teliyani Mana Charitra* appeared in 1986, she read it secretly, as she had read the work of Chalam. 'It was an exciting book and raised many issues that we would take up later, but I did not see any dalit women in it. They got as far as Duddala Salamma, a BC woman, but there were no dalits. As for Chalam, the women in his writings are all upper-caste women. He writes about women coming out of the house. But we are already out of the house. He does not really write about us, or about our issues—about the jogini issue, for instance. He does write about a "madiga ammayi". He describes her body in detail and has nothing to say about her mind, her emotions. It is difficult to believe that this is the same person who declared in the 1920s "women have minds, they have hearts" and so on. As for the father of Telugu literature, Kandukuri Veereshalingam, he writes so rudely about the poet Muddupalani, referring to her as "adi, idi" as though she was an object, not a person!

'It is against this backdrop that you have to understand the political significance of a book like *Nallapoddu* [Black Dawn, an anthology of writing by dalit women]. That book really inspired me and helped me take my writing seriously. There are fifty-three Telugu dalit women writers featured there—and there were more that could have been included. These were the writers who had been obscured by the politics of literature, the politics of caste and the politics of gender. Such writers become visible when they break free of these structures and emerge.' Subhadra points out that we find no dalit woman in the path-breaking feminist collection, *Neelimeghalu*, except one coastal mala woman writer. There are no dalit woman-centred stories in *Noorella Panta*, one hundred stories by Telugu women writers of the twentieth century compiled by Bhargavi Rao.

In January 2009, Subhadra participated in 'Manalo Manam', a two-day state-level conference organized to bring women writers on a single platform and review literature on women. There she criticized feminism in Andhra Pradesh, calling it a coastal Andhra-dominated upper-caste women's movement and said this needs to change. Unfortunately, her criticism did not find a place in the official report of the conference. Disturbed by such actions, she along with some others formed 'Mattipoolu' in a conference of SC, ST, OBC and minority women writers that was held in March 2009. The aim of this group is to discuss oppressed-caste women's experience and their representation in all public domains.

Subhadra holds an MA and M.Phil in Telugu Literature from Kakatiya University and works in the Andhra Pradesh Government Secretariat. She was among those who founded the Secretariat Women Employees' Welfare Association in 1992, and was for

many years a principal office bearer in the organization. She currently holds the rank of a joint secretary in the government. 'Dalit officers are generally put in charge of social welfare or panchayat raj—the "low caste" areas. The work is demanding; we are on tour most of the time. Also, I may hold the rank of joint secretary, but I have been assigned a shabby office and given a car that other officers have rejected. The attitude is that the job itself is a favour done to us!'

In 2006, she co-edited with Gogu Shyamala the collection *Nallaregatisallu: Madiga, Madiga Upakulala Aadolla Kathalu* (Furrows in Black Soil: The Stories of Madiga and Madiga Sub-caste Women), and with Krupakar Madiga, *Kaitunakala Dandem: Madiga Kavitvam* (Strips of Beef, Hung Up to Dry: Madiga Poetry, 2008). 'Badilone Dostulu Urilo Kadu' (Friends in School, 2008) appeared in the Different Tales series of children's stories, and has been translated into English and Malayalam. Her first collection of poems *Ayyayyo Dammakka* appeared in 2010. A collection of thirty stories, some of which are focused on the experiences of women panchayat members and sarpanches, is due in 2013.

A Bloody Mess in the Bathroom

Translated by Diia Rajan

Our hostel building was the one and only pucca hostel building the government built for girls in Warangal. All the other social welfare hostels were rented. These were usually either old houses with low tiled roofs or flat-roofed concrete houses. Like cattle driven into cattle sheds, children were crammed into the hostels, into tiny pigsty rooms with no ventilators and hardly any bathrooms to speak of. Every morning was a battle for water, for food and for the bathrooms. You had to be up at 4.30 in the morning to use the toilet, have a bath and get ready. If you woke up a few minutes too late, you'd be lucky to find a mug of water to take to the toilet. Where there is a public hand pump somewhere close to the hostel, two girls bring a bucket of water back together and that's all they have for bathing and everything else. If there is no hand pump, you have to use the waste water from the kitchen, left over from washing the rice and vegetables. No wonder most social welfare kids have scabies and skin sores! Walk past a social welfare hostel anytime any day and you can catch a fight between pigs and dogs—perhaps they are fighting for their rightful share! This is the social welfare scene.

The two-storeyed Balasamudram hostel for girls is the only pucca building in Warangal. Compared to the other rented hostels, it has all the facilities a hostel needs.

The ground floor houses schoolgirls from class two to ten and the first floor houses college girls. There is plenty of water—a twenty-four-hour supply! It has a large barren compound fenced in by a wall. Intermediate, degree, vocational students and teacher-trainees, some thirty-odd girls, all live together in six rooms on the first floor. But all the toilets are on the ground floor, to be shared between the school and college girls.

I was lucky to get a seat here. I was so thrilled. I daydreamed all day about building temples of knowledge and spending all my time studying. I wouldn't have to waste my energies worrying about food and water and toilets and bathing. Before I left for the hostel to join intermediate, my father sat me down and said, 'Bidda, I married everyone in our family off at the age of seven. I'm educating you because you are the youngest. You go bring me a good name—I don't want to hear someone say that fellow's daughter is "that kind" of girl. Take care!'

So, college, hostel, my books and a couple of close friends were all that my life revolved around for those couple of years.

One day, when I came back to the hostel from college, all the girls—the young ones and the older ones—were hanging around outside whispering to each other, looking for all the world like someone had just died. I walked up to a group of girls and asked, 'What's up, Yakamma? Why is everyone outside? Has something happened to someone?' But before she could reply, I overheard the hostel workers talking to each other.

'Did you see that, Mallu? I tell you it's so sinful … the bathroom is full of blood … who has done this? A college girl or schoolgirl? … I can't figure it out! Obviously, some kid got pregnant and took something to miscarry … I tell you, Lachakka, never trust these educated whores!'

Someone replied, 'Listen, Ramakka, if you miscarry, won't you be exhausted with all the blood loss? But these kids are all running around like headless chicken, aren't they?'

'Yeah, I guess … No one really looks pale or sickly.'

I heard another voice: 'Whatever … whoever she is she must be pretending like she is okay so that no one figures it out.'

Mallakka, the sweeper, came towards us beating her chest, crying out loudly, 'Whose fate is so cursed? Is this a sin or an injustice … either way, someone's life is ruined.'

This talk of theirs scared us to death. Everyone was so agitated, we couldn't even talk to each other. Even the college girls were stunned. We stood there with heavy feet, clinging to each other, not knowing what to do about this mess.

In the meantime, the gurkha watchman brought the hostel warden. Even though nominally there were two wardens for the two hostels—upstairs and downstairs—only the college hostel warden wielded any real authority. She controlled all the kids in all

sorts of ways. She would make us sign declarations that we were fed meat once a week, and dal and vegetables every day, which of course we weren't! We even had to cook up a perfect attendance record for her. And when the inspections happened, we had to stick to the story. To protect herself from the possibility of girls complaining about her, she cleverly kept a record of everyone's comings and goings, who had the most male visitors, whose attendance in college was poor, who watches the most movies—all this data she used to make sure we toed the line and kept our mouths shut. That's the kind of woman she was.

So with this new problem on our heads, we were all worried—what would this woman do to us now? Whom would she tear to pieces? Which one of us would be kicked out of the hostel? We were terrified.

The warden arrived and the hostel workers rushed towards her. 'Namaste amma … namaste namaste …'

'It's all very well to say namaste, but what the hell are all of you doing here … letting all this drama happen in the hostel,' she replied, peering into the bathrooms as she climbed up the stairs.

When she passed us, we scattered into small frightened groups and followed her slowly to her room. The warden plonked herself on a chair, and with sprightly sadistic pleasure, she called out, 'Mallamma, gather all the schoolgirls who have matured … and make sure all the college girls come upstairs as well.'

All the college girls stood around looking guilty for no reason. We were scared and anxious, and you could see the apprehension on our faces.

The warden looked us up and down, head to toe, piercing into us, sieving through our minds. 'Rajamma, has anyone been looking ill for the past few days?' she asked.

'Well … I don't really know, amma …'

'What do you mean you don't really know?' asked the warden. 'Don't you notice anything when you feed them?'

Rajamma replied, 'Everything is such a mess at mealtime, madam … We can hardly pay attention to their plates, it's impossible to pay attention to their faces also … There's always such a rush …'

'Did anyone go home today?' the warden asked.

Rajamma the assistant cook slowly recollected that Shantamma and Shoshamma had gone to their villages.

'But, Rajakka, aren't they class three students … a bit young, no?' the warden dripped sarcasm.

The other workers laughed half-heartedly.

‘This is no joking matter,’ she shouted. ‘The hostel’s prestige is at stake … the hostel will be ruined and, as warden, I will have to bear the blame,’ as if her honesty and morality were the foundations of the hostel!

She turned to look at us. Girls who come back late to the hostel, those who have a lot of male visitors, those who take pains to dress nicely, those who go out to the movies—they were all suspect in her eyes. She singled them out, gathered them around her, and examined them with a magnifying glass. Thankfully, I was not in her list of usual suspects and I was saved from the interrogation in this round at least. The warden called the others into her room, roared at them, threatened them, and basically conducted a third degree without the help of the police. She said the most insulting things about our castes, poverty, habits, basic needs, even our minds and souls. She ranted and raved for a long time, but she still couldn’t get at the truth.

‘You better confess, you know … we will get to the bottom of this and then things can get uncomfortable for you,’ she threatened. ‘This will become a big issue in the district, in the state … the press will come, the police will come. What do you think of yourselves … aborting a pregnancy is a simple thing? Other girls will follow your example and then what …’

Her words were difficult to digest. We were all quiet, standing there with eyes downcast.

‘What’s up, Marthamma? … Apparently this past month you’ve hardly been in the hostel?’ the warden asked.

‘No, madam, I’ve been here in the hostel only,’ mumbled Marthamma.

Then the warden turned to Shakuntala and asked sarcastically, ‘How about you, have your visitors increased or decreased?’

Shakuntala just bent her head silently.

‘Lakshmamma, this is not the way to set them right … tell the gurkha to bring the office jeep.’

We were just about picking up the courage to look up at her with our pale, helpless faces when she started again. ‘The government gives you so many facilities and this is the nonsense you get up to? You can offer a dog ghee and rice, but it will still run back to the tannery … what can anyone do! The only way we can find out the truth is to get you all tested in the hospital,’ she said as she called out for the jeep again.

This threat was like pouring boiling oil into our stomachs.

The warden told the workers to get ready before the jeep came, went into her room and shut the door. We quietly filed into our rooms.

I asked a degree student, ‘Akka, what was Madam saying? I didn’t understand …’

‘What’s there not to understand! The tests will bring out the real character of everyone … that’s how the bathroom mystery will be solved,’ she replied, imitating the warden.

Another girl added, ‘Why should we be afraid, we haven’t done anything … we can go wherever they take us. Come …’

Tenth-class Karuna asked BSc student Durgakka, ‘How do they do this test, Akka?’

‘What do you mean how? They’ll look at our stomachs, strip off our clothes and stick a tester between our legs. That’s how,’ said Durgakka.

A lot of girls went cold on hearing this. Our stomachs turned. Everyone went quiet.

Neither the schoolgirls nor the college girls had the courage to refuse the test. We knew that if we refused, or protested, this dirty accusation would become our burden to bear. So we swallowed our anxieties, discomfort and the thought that we didn’t want to get the test done.

The warden’s methods were not new to us; after all, we had suffered all kinds of humiliation at her hands. If we ever complained that we weren’t getting enough vegetables or that the curries were inedible, she would retort, ‘Look at your face, do you look like you need vegetables … eating raw chilli and rice all your life and now you demand vegetables! Getting used to feasting on government money, hun …’

When we asked for our pocket money she would taunt, ‘Who wants your beggar’s alms … I’ll give it when I have the time.’ If anyone ever dared to stand up to her she would find some way of getting them kicked out of the hostel.

No matter what she said or did, we could not defy her—we were helpless because we were insecure. That day, the thought that she was going to subject our bodies to invasive tests wounded us more than anything else ever had. But we were incapable of protesting. Better to die than live with this kind of accusation on your head. So, everyone silently got ready to go get tested.

I was also getting ready to go, but somewhere in my mind a small strength, a firm self-confidence, refused to give in. The easy way out was to go along with everyone else and get tested. After all, there is comfort in numbers. The problem is in resisting. Would I be able to deal with the difficulties of defiance? What would my future be if I got kicked out? What would happen to my parents’ dreams for me? Would I become the wound on the ox’s back for a hundred crows to peck at?

Being a woman herself, how could the warden subject us girls to this ‘abortion test’? How could I swallow my shame and strip to get tested? After all, all things considered, I am only an intermediate student. Who would care what I did … would anyone stand by me? My mind was in turmoil, but a silent courage shone in my stomach: ‘I won’t go to the hospital … come what may.’ I recollected stories of bravery, made my mind up, took

a deep breath and walked into the degree students' rooms, determined to convince the other girls not to go to the hospital either.

Sunandakka saw me and said, 'Hello? You aren't ready yet? Hurry up …'

'I don't feel like going,' I replied.

'Why?'

'I'd rather die than get this test done, Akka … Not just me, everyone feels the same way, Akka. You are older, you are the seniors, no? … Please, Akka, please go talk to Madam and tell her not to get these hospital tests done,' I pleaded.

She looked at me as though I had said something unthinkable. 'What are you saying … What's the point of arguing with the pestle, once you've stuck your head in the mortar? Don't try to act too smart. If we refuse the test, we'll get into more trouble. We haven't done anything wrong, so why worry about getting tested.' Irritated, she continued, 'Why all that headache … shut up and get ready. Hurry up now.'

I lost my temper. 'I don't care, you guys go … I'm not coming.'

'Have you lost it? What the hell is wrong with you, if you don't come they'll kick you out of the hostel … use your head,' Sunandakka said.

'No, I'm not coming, Akka,' I said firmly. I turned away and walked back to my room. Everyone—my room-mates and others—asked me with anxious surprise, 'So, are you not getting ready?'

The jeep arrived and fifteen girls at a time were packed in and sent to the nearest nursing home. The warden instructed the workers that all the rooms should be scanned for matured schoolgirls and college girls, so no one could escape the test. Lakshmamma found me sitting in my room and asked suspiciously, 'What's the matter girl, everyone is going for the test… Why are you sitting here?'

'I'm not going,' I said in a determined voice.

'Ayyo,' she said 'but Madam won't agree.'

'I'll tell Madam myself, you go,' I nearly shouted.

My determination grew. Not being in the warden's list of usual suspects strengthened my resolve. I suppose my confidence lay in the fact that she had no hold over me. I had never got into her bad books. In minutes, everyone in the hostel got to know that I had refused to get tested. The warden and some hostel workers came to my room. I was a little afraid, but I stood my ground. 'Oh, so it's Your Highness … Behind that innocent face is quite a troublemaker, I see,' she said.

'Madam, I'm not going to get tested. Everyone in this hostel knows what kind of a person I am. You do what you want, but I am not going to the hospital,' I said with all the bravery I could muster.

No one had ever stood up to the warden before, and I had hurt her ego by defying her in front of the workers. Like a dog whose ear was cut she squealed loudly, 'I'll take care of you tomorrow … Let's see how you continue in this hostel.' She took the workers and went to the hospital.

But, the tests didn't settle the bathroom mystery. That whole issue became foggy and now everyone was only discussing me. I was the bubblegum for everyone to chew. The warden was totally occupied with how to teach me a lesson. The workers also went back home wondering what Madam would do the next day. My stomach was feeling more and more queasy. If the warden put her threats into action, what would happen to my studies, what would I tell my mother and father? All the girls were worried about what Madam would do to me—no one slept that night. What fires would the warden kindle to have me thrown out of the hostel? The thought worried all of us. A lot of girls cried in the hospital while they were being tested. Others came back and went straight to bed, weeping.

Worried about what the dawn would bring to the future of my education, I didn't get a wink of sleep. As I began to fall asleep, in the early hours of the morning, I was woken up by a commotion downstairs. It was the hostel workers.

'Damn this dog … kick it out … it better not come back this way again …,' they were shouting.

'Maybe it's this one that mucked up the bathroom yesterday … and today again, right here near the boring … avvavva … disgusting dog!'

Another voice said, 'If we had only known that the dog was the culprit … how much those girls suffered … so much humiliation and all that public interrogation, all for what?'

Madduri Nagesh Babu

Madduri Nagesh Babu's is the poetry of protest. It is angry and emotional; it does not use the 'respectable' language of the literary elite; the voice is distinct, and his own. His poetry has no prehistory and it follows no established niceties. It breaks with the past and begins the dalit movement of the 1990s. 'If Nagesh Babu was a reddy, kamma or brahmin, he would have got a Nobel Prize or a Jnanapith award. I regard him as one of the four or five best Telugu poets. If he was not recognized, it was because he was dalit. Telugu literature never gave him the respect he deserves. Ignore his dalit ideology—even then, his poetry, purely as poetry, has such power and depth. He writes so well and so easily; one can count such poets on the fingers of one hand,' the poet Khaja, close friend and editor of Nagesh Babu's writings, observes. It was a great loss to the dalit movement and to Telugu poetry that Nagesh Babu passed away on 10 January 2004 in a hospital in Vijayawada. Katti Padma Rao paid tribute to him, saying, 'He was a powerful poet, next only to Jashuva in analysing the scourge of caste.'

Nagesh Babu was born in Satuluru village near Narasaraopeta on 15 August 1964. Both his father Jakraiah and mother Anasuyamma were teachers. Jakraiah died when Nagesh Babu was in the tenth class, and he and his sister were brought up by their mother. He studied in the Lutheran High School, Narasaraopeta, and then joined Andhra Christian College, Guntur, for his intermediate and BA. He did his MA (English Literature) from Andhra University, Visakhapatnam. He moved to Hyderabad to pursue his M.Phil in the Department of Comparative Literature in Telugu University, Hyderabad, during 1991–93. In 1993, he got a job as an announcer in All India Radio (AIR) and was posted in Kothagudem.

At the time that Nagesh Babu joined AIR, Khaja, then still a student, was working there as an occasional announcer. One day, seeing Nagesh Babu carrying the bulletin *Kanjira*, Khaja walked up and introduced himself. That was a 6 December special issue, and it carried Nagesh Babu's poem 'Ayido Gadi', which was written from the perspective of a Muslim. This meeting was an important turning point in dalit literary history. Khaja introduced Nagesh Babu to Krishna of 'Krishna Ads', which was a painting shop-cum-literary forum. 'Krishna used to run a painting shop. He would have started up around 1988 or '89. It had a library. A number of poets used to stop by—among them Siva Reddy, Katti Padma Rao, Sikhamani, Theresh Babu—and the shop became a forum for literary discussions. Krishna, Akbar and I were the people who

were really active in it. We did not have a political outlook. We just loved poetry and used to publish it. Nagesh Babu introduced Ambedkarism to us and "thickened" our poetry,' Khaja says.

Khaja and Nagesh Babu became close friends. 'We used to meet regularly to discuss poetry. Nagesh Babu's room was full of books. If you wanted to meet him, you had to go with a poem. I was the first reader for most of his poems. Theresh Babu, who was also working as announcer there, joined our team. Except for a couple here or there, Nagesh Babu's poems were not published until 1993. But it was 1995 that was the critical year in our life. *Chikkanavutunna Pata* came out in January. It included some of Nagesh Babu's poems. We did not know Lakshmi Narasaiah [who edited the collection] and met him for the first time when we went to Vijayawada for the release. We met several dalit writers there. The discussion that followed the anthology really gave us clarity. Nagesh Babu was the driving force of that debate.' Khaja speaks about how charged the discussion became, especially in the context of the rise of dalit literature in the 1990s. 'We were upset and angry that people attacked our poetry without using their own names and owning their statements. There were many questions and arguments: about whether muslimvada writing [a literature from the Muslim backward castes—to which Khaja also belongs] was dalit poetry; about the relationship between caste and class; about whether dalit poetry is really only prose; about whether songs better express the dalit sensibility, and so on. Nagesh felt that we should participate actively in the debate. So in response to this debate, we published a small collection of four poems, titled *Nishani*, in 1995. It was Nagesh's idea. Nagesh, Theresh and I discussed it. The three of us and "Varadaiah" [Lakshmi Narasaiah's pseudonym] contributed to it. We published it under the newly formed Kala Publications imprint. *Nishani* was released in Rajahmundry in April 1995. Nagesh Babu was central to that initiative. He would chase you persistently until the job was done. He was like that.'

Nagesh Babu married Vijayasree on 15 August 1993. It was a social marriage, where the poets Siva Reddy, Sikhamani and others spoke. We have two daughters, Sreeja and Asmita. 'He was frank and bold,' Vijayasree told us. In 1995, Nagesh Babu cleared the Andhra Pradesh Public Service Commission Group II exams and got a job as deputy tahsildar in Bapatla. In 1999, he became mandal revenue officer. He was a good administrator, focused on solving people's problems—of dalits as well as others.

A prolific writer, Nagesh Babu was sensitive to many issues and declared himself as always on the side of the oppressed. He was a strong dalitavadi and wrote on all issues (whether it was removing a tooth or even blood pressure) from a dalit point of view. Khaja, who describes himself as the unofficial spokesperson of Nagesh Babu, edited and published *Putta* (Anthill, 2005) and *Godavari* (2007), which Nagesh Babu had written in Kothagudem but had not published. Nagesh Babu's first published collection

of poetry was *Veliwada* (Untouchable Locality, 1995). He went on to publish seven more, *Loya* (Valley, 1996), *Ooru-Wada* (with Rani Sivasankara Sarma; Village and Untouchable Locality, 1997), *Rachchabanda* (Village Square, 1997), *Meerevutlu?* (What People Are You?, 1998) and *Naraloka Prarthana* (A Worldly Prayer, 2002). He and Khaja edited *Kasta Siggupadadam* (We Ought All to Be Ashamed, 1996), a collection of poetry that expressed solidarity with dalits. 'Nagesh Babu would respond with a poem to incidents reported in the newspapers, such as the rape of Sajjalagudem Mahadevamma on 14 May 1995, the controversy over A.R. Rahman's song and any atrocity against dalits. He wanted to present a dalit viewpoint on every issue. He also put together an edited collection of love poems, titled *Vidi Aakasaham* (A Separate Sky) in 1999 on the Ambedkarist idea of love. This was after Suneetha, a dalit student, committed suicide. *Ooru-Wada* is an attempt to imagine a new relationship between the upper castes and dalits. We planned to bring out a music video of dalit pop songs and prepared seven songs, but couldn't complete that project—we could not put together enough money,' Khaja adds.

Though a mala himself, Madduri supported the Dandora movement. His argument was simple: the unrepresented and unrecognized castes must be supported if they came forward with identity claims. He wrote the poem '2+3=1' in 1996. His stand on the categorization question was clear as early as that. He also used to write a column on dalit and feminist ideology in the women's page of the magazine *Navya.* He often urged Khaja to write on Muslims, to explore who he was and what his role should be as a poet. Nagesh Babu was also instrumental in sending Akbar, the artist, to Hyderabad. 'Everyone who meets Nagesh will end up writing a poem. I have never met any other person who was so influential,' Khaja observed.

Nagesh Babu argued that reform or struggle within Hinduism was pointless. He urged people to leave the Hindu framework and wrote *Naraloka Prarthana* to make his point. He was from a Christian family, he grew up in an environment saturated by the Bible, and he studied in the Lutheran High School. In his early life, he lived in Christian localities like Premnagar and malapalle in Narasaraopeta. This background is evident in the Christian language and imagery that his powerful poetry uses. The title poems of the collections *Naraloka Prarthana* and *Meerevutlu?*—the latter widely hailed as 'a textbook on dalit identity and caste'—are also translated here.

A This-Worldly Prayer

Translated by Sarath Davala

Dear brothers-and-sisters-in-humiliation,

In these days when newspapers spread evil and hatred,
is it not time for us to proclaim the real Good News?
At a time when satanic mobs slaughter and wreak havoc,
should we not, at least now, become a salvation army?

We who kneel and pray unceasingly
traversing the Other World,
Should we not now compose a worldly prayer
in the words of war?
In a land where saying 'love thy neighbour as thyself'
is strange and invites mockery,
let us issue an eleventh commandment:
'Hate your enemy—with satanic force.'

Alongside, and even more urgently,
let us lash together
a new cross, to crucify
this reigning Antichrist.

Judases are found,
not only among the Israelites but in this land too.
To betray and capture the Aryan king,
thirty-three crore lives may have to be risked,
not just thirty-three pieces of silver.
We must crucify him!
Never mind, let the curse of
this sin be on us and our children.

On this head drunk on arrogance,

let us press down a crown of scorpions,
not just a crown of thorns.
Have we not read, ‘covet not your neighbour’s goods?’
But he covets our land, thrusts the spear into our side.
Now let us plunge not just the spear but
a beam itself deep into his belly.

On his wooden-horse face, let’s splash dung-water,
not mere spit,
and make him drink sulphuric acid,
not mere vinegar.
Let us sentence him to a death
with no resurrection even thirty-three epochs later.
And let us, then, establish here a kingdom of humanity.

Brothers!
We are done with the reading from the scripture;
If you can now lift your heads, we will pray.
O Lord, You have assured us
that You will be in our midst
whenever two or three of us are gathered in Your name.
Grant us the sense to come together as five,
not split into twos or threes.
Grant us David’s sling
not just Solomon’s wisdom.

To us, O Lord, who only dream of a heaven after death,
grant the sight to see the hell that surrounds us here and now.
Teach us Christians, who merely eat, drink and make merry,
to also think a little,
teach us to imitate, not only your glorious Son
but also our mahar thinker.

We ask this, O Father, in the name of dalits.

A This-Worldly Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name
even as dark forces rage!

May our kingdom come soon.
The State itself tramples on our dreams, our beliefs.
Bring Your wrath and strike down
the ugly reign of the saffron mobs
that let Thy will to be done only in our hearts,
but not in our lives.

O Lord, give us or give us not today our daily bread
but give no sustenance to these fattened, lustful beasts,
that rape nuns in churches.

Forgive not these wicked
who have made it their mission
to trespass against us.
These, whom *we* forgive,
helpless as we are.

Remove from the throne these wicked ones
who live to spread hatred.
Grant us, O Father, the kingdom and the power,
and then proclaim your glory. Amen.
May the wisdom of Ambedkar
burn within us and
may we thus be liberated from our wretchedness.
Amen.

What People Are You?[1]

Translated by Syed Mujeebuddin

The blood curdles.
Somebody fries the heart, turning it over, moving it
around, on a pan without oil.
Sharp poisoned needles shoot through to the fingertips.
Hands tied behind the back;
an endrine-filled syringe
injected right into the heart.
A belly slashed open and intestines
wound tight on a thorny stick.

What people are you?

A man ripped apart, like paper.
Human beings ground up like paddy poured into a switched-on mill.
A hatchet dug deep into the back. Suddenly, out of the blue,
spikes impaling the eyes.
A hammer hitting down on the crown of iron thorns.

What people are you?

A tree pulled out, root and all, from moistureless soil.
Temples squashed tight in a pressing machine.
Teeth broken without a sedative.
Eyelids cut open and acid poured in drop by drop.
A red-hot rod shoved up the anus.

What people are you?

Nose and ears sliced and thrown away.
Thumbs hacked off with sharp sickles.
Severed heads suspended from the temple pillar.
Tied down to a tree, hemmed in by hay set on fire.
An eyeball that pops out like a fish egg from a single blow.
What people are you?

What caste are you what caste are you what caste are you?
Entwined and strangled in shame
words soak and soak again in the mouth, wilt into a grumble.
Helplessly glancing sideways, as when desperately restraining the urge to pee.
Pale faced as when something indigestible lurches in the stomach.
Jolted as with a thunderclap right over the head.

Is this not the question you really want to ask: 'What caste are you?'
Why does it matter to you who we are?
Why does it matter what caste we are?
Can't you digest what you eat if you do not know what caste we are?
Doesn't your sun rise if you don't know the source of our birth?

Unless a thorn is removed with another thorn,
this crown of thorns will never be shed.
Insult cannot be escaped without retort.
Tooth for tooth, eye for eye.

But Sir, what caste are *you*, please tell.
Ah … *what caste* … you, who excitedly ask, what caste, what caste,
you must be the seed and flower sprung from the flanks of three crore gods.
You who have grown rotting maggots in your skull instead of brains,
you who have hidden sharpened bodkins instead of sight in your eyes,
you who have felt impurities in your hands instead of touch.
Well, whatever! You who ask, long-windedly, 'what caste are you?'

tell me, what is your tale?
Are you, by any chance, planning to give me your daughter in marriage,
wash my feet and perform kanyadanam?

*

There's no difficulty now,
there's no impatience now. Let me tell you:
we are mala—we don't smell of lentils,
we are madiga—we don't scratch our itchy backs with the holy thread,
we are yerukala—we don't have eczema in our groins,
we are BC—we don't leave home to prostitute ourselves,
we are turaka[2]—we are human beings,
we are aborigines—slaves and the enslaved. Nagas. Dalits.
We are the true citizens of this country …

You look uncomfortable.
Do you feel a bowel movement coming?
Shall I speak the real truth … we are true Indians.
And you, uncivilized Aryans, you come from some remote place!
At least now forget the primitive expression—what's your caste
or else … we will set you back on the road to Asia Minor.

Manda Krishna Madiga

Manda Krishna Madiga, founder president of the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS) and social activist, was born in 1965 in Sayampeta, Warangal district. His given name was Elaiah. His officially recorded name [in school] is Yellaiah. And that's not the last of the stories around his name.

Krishna Madiga's parents, Chinna Komuraiah and Komuramma, were agricultural labourers. His childhood was spent in Sayampeta, and he studied until his SSLC in the Government High School in nearby Hanmakonda. Though there were no upper castes in Sayampeta, the munnuru kapus (OBCs), who were the dominant caste in his village, practised untouchability. The harshness of their rule is evident in this episode: 'One day a boy called Kiran was on his way to the village from Hyderabad. The munnuru kapus stopped him, made him take off his shirt and his footwear and carry them until he reached the dalit locality,' Krishna recollects. Insult and violence had become routine practice for, or even the culture of, the dominant castes. Any attempt to resist these attacks would lead to clashes. The police cases that resulted were booked, nearly always, against the dalits. On one occasion in 1983, Krishna himself was arrested and imprisoned. As a consequence, he had to drop out of school (he was doing his intermediate at the time). He joined the Radical Youth League (RYL) of the People's War (PW), and soon became involved in its underground work. He was made a central organizer in 1984. However, shortly after that, Krishna was arrested. Trouble caused by the dominant groups in the village continued. When he tried to intervene, he faced problems from both the Naxalites and the police.

It was against this backdrop that the Chimakurthy incident (1992) took place in which two dalit quarry workers, Yesamma and Ramulamma, were raped and killed. 'When we raised questions, there was a lathi charge and firing. Satyamurthy [better known as 'SM'], a former Naxalite leader [who appears in this collection under the pen name Sivasagar], decided to form the Samata Volunteer Force (SVF) to resist attacks against dalits.' Responding to this, Krishna began attending the training classes for SVF that were being held in Achanta. To his surprise, SM addressed him as 'Krishna', presumably since his underground name in the party was Kishen. As a result, Elaiah/Yellaiah became Krishna from then on. Krishna spent nine months working for SVF in Chimakurthy.

In 1994, he attended a public meeting conducted by the Adi Jambava Arundathiyar Samakhya, a madiga organization in Hyderabad. Representatives from all the four southern states had come to the meeting. The main discussion there was the unequal distribution of SC reservations and other welfare benefits and the injustice to madigas that ensued from this. Convinced by the importance of this issue, he tried to discuss it with Satyamurthy, but did not get a positive response. Krishna decided to take it up anyway. He went to Edumudi, a village near Ongole, where he called a meeting of the madiga youth. Things moved fast after that. On 7 July 1994, the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS) was formed. As an act declaring their pride in the caste, they decided to suffix 'Madiga' to their names—so from that day on, he was Krishna Madiga.

The rest is history, because this leader of the MRPS played a major role over the next decade in transforming the understanding of what constitutes scheduled castes and pressing for proportional representation through a popular movement.

The interview with Krishna Madiga that follows captures the history that the MRPS (often also referred to as Dandora) created in the fifteen-odd years since its inception. The organization successfully raised the categorization issue at every level, taking it from the village to the state Legislative Assembly, and from there to the Parliament in Delhi. Krishna Madiga also formed a number of organizations and small forums, and took up issues of the disabled, children with congenital heart problems and human rights violations in Andhra Pradesh. In 2003, by-elections were held for the Madira constituency, from where Krishna contested and lost as an independent candidate. He has emerged as a strategist and mass leader who knows how to deal with a liberal State in a productive manner. Importantly, he was able to use political parties without yielding to pressure from them.

Manda Krishna Madiga: An Interview[1]

Translated by K. Srinivasulu

Q: Please tell us about the context for starting the MRPS. Give us an account of your political and organizational affiliation and activities before the MRPS phase. What were the organizations and social forces that joined the MRPS? How did it gain the form of a movement?

Krishna Madiga (KM): My native place is Warangal. MRPS was started in Ongole. I did not go to Ongole in order to set up MRPS. I was there to stand up against the severe [police] repression in Warangal in the 1990s.

I completed SSC in 1981. Around this time there was a marked increase in the attacks on malas and madigas by dominant-caste men. The attack on Mala Komaraiah in my village, Hunter Road, Sayampeta, was the turning point that brought me and some others into the struggle. In the process of finding a solution to this conflict, we developed contacts with the Radical Youth League. My involvement with the struggle led to the disruption of my studies and eventually to my joining PW. This was when the NTR government conducted its first 'encounter', in which State Committee members Palle Kanakaiah and Athram Asham in Adilabad, and Haribushan in Warangal, were killed. In his election campaign, NTR had described Naxalites as patriots, but once in power, he unleashed repression on them.

I was a central organizer (CO) of PW. In 1983, I was arrested and released in 1984. After my release, I led a regular domestic life. But the police continued to harass me. If anything, the harassment only increased. The police even wanted to kill me in an encounter. In the meantime, my differences and tensions with PW also increased. We began distancing ourselves from PW as some dominant-caste people got closer to it. These people were involved in moneylending. One incident that triggered the conflict was when a young madiga rickshaw puller could not pay back the last instalment of the borrowed money on time, the dominant elite, which was close to the party, stripped, thrashed and paraded him in the village. We protested against this and held a panchayat [public trial] in the village. PW questioned how I, a non-member of the party, had dared to conduct the trial. To this my reply was: 'Why should one be a member of the PW to demand self-respect?' I was beaten almost to death. It took some time for me to recuperate. This sharpened my conflict with the group. At the same time, I continued to be harassed by the police for my earlier affiliation with PW.

Around this time, some important developments also took place in dalit politics in Andhra Pradesh. After the Chimakurthy atrocity in Prakasam district, in which two quarry workers, Yesamma and Ramulamma, were raped and murdered, K.G. Satyamurthy, who had left PW, announced the formation of the Samata Volunteer Force to train dalits to counter upper-caste attacks and invited dalits to join it for self-defence.

I was sandwiched between the police and PW, and was experiencing harassment from both. In response to Satyamurthy's call, I went to Achanta in West Godavari district where I met, besides Satyamurthy, Oo Sa, Gowtam and others.

A few others and I were asked to go to Chimakurthy to set up and organize the SVF and the Samajika Viplava Vedika. With Chimakurthy as the centre, I worked in the

district for the next nine months. That was the time when a series of atrocities took place—Kandukuru, Brindavanam, etc. My family joined me there. (I had married in 1983.)

In 1994, on behalf of the Adi Jambava Arundathiyar Samakhya of southern states, its Andhra Pradesh state president N. Venkatswamy (a retired IAS officer) and general secretary Manda Jagannadham issued a pamphlet on the unequal access to reservation benefits among SCs. This was the time when Kotla Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy was the chief minister [CM] and elections were due in the state. In view of this, the Congress organized meetings of caste organizations to rally the support of different castes. The Adi Jambava Arundathiyar Samakhya also organized a conference in the Nizam College grounds. The pamphlet distributed here highlighted the unequal access of the madigas, as compared to the malas, in the state with regard to reservations in education, employment and even in budget allocations. It explained the ground situation based on data and demanded that reservations and budgetary allocations should reach the madigas in proportion to their share in the population. Prominent madiga leaders in the Congress, like Manda Jagannadham, Sadalakshmi and Koneru Ranga Rao, backed this demand. The issue attracted a huge response from the madigas, but the leadership failed to articulate it with the necessary clarity.

This was also the time that prominent dalit activists like K.G. Satyamurthy, Bojja Tharakam and Katti Padma Rao joined the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) with a view to capturing political power. Nalla Surya Prakash and Satyamurthy were critical of the madigas' raising the issue of SC sub-categorization and giving their support to the Congress when the BSP was emerging in the state. I contested their views by asking how we could fight against the dominance of upper castes if we remain silent about our own internal inequalities. Even members of the Congress party (except Sadalakshmi) did not raise the issue of sub-categorization. The madiga youth protested, realizing that the Congress leaders were only interested in the madiga vote bank.

It was clear to me that there was a huge gulf between the aspirations of the madigas, especially the youth, and the political elite's ability to address them, let alone organize the community. I was convinced that this was a serious issue that needed to be addressed with urgency. I raised this issue for discussion in SVF. Satyamurthy and the BC [backward caste] members accepted that there are clear inequalities among the dalits. I was the only madiga in the organization; all the other dalits were malas. Despite such an admission, Satyamurthy was reluctant to persuade the mala members and finally admitted his inability to lead a struggle on this issue. This was in sharp contrast to the enthusiasm he showed with regard to building resistance among dalits to atrocities.

I made it clear to Satyamurthy that his reluctance to address the plight of the madigas and the sub-categorization issue was because he was mala himself. With this, our positions and the resultant divide became clear. I walked out, vowing to work for the interests of my madiga community and against the injustice to it resulting from the one-sided benefit in the SC reservations to the malas.

My contacts at that time were mainly in Ongole. As part of my work in the Samajika Viplava Vedika, I knew some madiga activists. I placed the madiga issue before them for discussion. While fighting for the dalit issue, I said, we have not paid attention to the madiga jati and suggested that we should do both—indeed, while fighting for madiga rights, we would also fight for the dalit samaj as a whole. This resolution to fight against the injustice to the madigas led to the formation of the MRPS on 7 July 1994 in Edumudi village near Ongole. Initially, there were only twenty young men in the MRPS, all of whom had been active in the Dalit Mahasabha. There was an involved discussion about naming the organization. Though 'Arundathi Maha Sabha' was proposed, we finally chose MRPS to keep the focus on the caste and reservation issue. To impart social identity and respectability to the madiga jati, we decided to suffix 'Madiga' to our names.

Q: How did Dandora become a state-level movement beginning from a small village in Prakasam? What are the different forms of struggle and organization?

KM: We had started an organization and so we had to expand it. Drawing inspiration from Dr Ambedkar's slogan 'educate, organize and agitate', we started organizing the madigas—beginning with the village and going on to the mandal and then the district levels. We also drew inspiration from Babu Jagjivan Ram's motto: 'Don't beg for your rights. Fight for them and achieve them.'

Within ten days of the formation of the MRPS, I was attacked by some malas in Chirala. We had decided to use the occasion of the Karamchedu Martyrs' Day (17 July) celebrations in Vijayanagar Colony, in which civil rights and dalit organizations were to participate. Vijayanagar Colony is a settlement of madigas from Karamchedu who had migrated to Chirala. We started our campaign by taking up the distribution of 20,000 pamphlets with a view that it would culminate in Chirala on 17 July. On that day, when we were distributing the pamphlets, we were obstructed and forced out of the area. Some activists on the dais, like K. Balagopal, who read our pamphlet made it a point to note that the issue of internal inequalities is a serious one and only when the issue is discussed and sought to be addressed would genuine unity among the dalits become possible.

But the situation remained tense. Then the madigas of Chirala called me one day and asked me to leave the place, as the demand would heighten the tensions and make their

life difficult. I shifted to Ongole, which has a strong madiga presence.

After this, we decided to redouble our efforts to expand our organization. We planned a public meeting on 25 August. This was the first meeting organized by the MRPS. It was held at the HCM compound in Ongole and madigas were mobilized in huge numbers from different parts of the district. We managed these numbers with our publicity and pamphleteering. The success of the rally and public meeting in Ongole acted as an inspiration for people from other areas. On the occasion of Gurram Jashuva's birthday on 28 September, another meeting was organized. The modus operandi was to organize a meeting, identify active forces, form a committee and give it the programme. This helped us to build and expand the organizational network.

From October onwards, a series of meetings were organized in Nellore, Guntur, Krishna and other districts. It was around this time that Krupakar Madiga came into contact with us. He was with Katti Padma Rao then and took some time to join us. We decided to hold a state conference and, with this in view, released the MRPS poster and pamphlet. Our own cadre distributed these throughout the state. We specifically made use of railway stations and bus stands to spread our message through these publicity materials [to catch the attention of people who were travelling to others areas, so that the news would spread]. Through this, we sought to make new contacts and expand beyond Ongole, Krishna and Warangal districts, where we already had some organizational presence. We met Sadalakshmi amma to invite her to the state conference; she agreed to come. Some people from older organizations were reluctant to invite her [because as a Congress person, she was considered 'establishment']. MRPS's first state conference was held in PVR College, Ongole, on 31 May 1995. The conference was a huge success with 50,000 people attending it—essentially, all those who were committed to the development of the madiga community attended. [Government] employees attended it in large numbers. The Adi Jambava Samakhya succeeded in organizing only the upper crust of madiga employees and the elite at the district level. They could not reach the grassroots and organize because of their jobs and lack of time. In contrast, the MRPS organized ordinary grass-roots cadre, who were by nature inclined to fight for the cause. This was followed by meetings and conferences in Rajahmundry, Vijayawada, Nellore, Tirupati and, by 1996, in the Telangana districts of Khammam and Warangal. In January 1996, we held the Rayalaseema conference at Kurnool, which was a grand success.

With Hyderabad as the centre, and while staying at Sadalakshmi's home, Krupakar Madiga and I toured the whole state and organized the madigas. We called our movement Madiga Hakkula Dandora. The name of the organization is MRPS, but this was our slogan. Madiga Hakkula Dandora means 'madiga rights are human rights'. We were clear that without educating and organizing, we would not be able to build the

struggle. So, for almost two years we made preparations. We had no money for food and travel. We were living almost like Buddhist bhikus.

We invited prominent madiga politicians from all parties, like Sadalakshmi, Motkupalli Narasimhulu, Kadiyam Srihari and Bangaru Laxman, to the meetings that were held as part of our campaign. The Telugu daily, *Vaartha*, which was launched just then actually gave our movement a fillip by bringing our issue to the centre stage through front-page headings and photos. We tried, through Kadiyam Srihari, to invite the then chief minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu, as the chief guest to a meeting we organized in Hyderabad, but he declined, saying that he was not interested in caste association meetings, nor would he like to encourage them. Naidu did not know the strength and influence that MRPS had in the state.

The meeting in the Nizam College grounds was a huge success, with more than a lakh people attending it—the streets were flooded with people. Interestingly, while Naidu had refused to attend the Dandora meeting, he did attend a smaller hall meeting organized by the gowdas, contrary to the principles he claimed to believe in. We took his refusal of the MRPS invitation as an insult and a clear instance of upper-caste arrogance, and spoke about this in the public meeting. We decided to protest against Naidu's casteist attitude through a relay hunger strike and black badges. There was huge and unprecedented protest throughout the state. We chose the state Assembly session, which was to be held in twenty days, as culmination of this campaign. With the call 'Assembly muttadi' [encircle the Assembly] to protest against the injury to madiga self-respect, we organized dharnas in mandal and district centres as a build-up to the showdown in the state Assembly. This shook the government. Perhaps intelligence reports had by now given the government a proper appraisal of the strength of our movement. Naidu called us for talks. We used this occasion to explain our main demand for the sub-categorization of SC reservations. Naidu promised to support the demand. We required that he announce it publicly. He agreed to do so in the Assembly. When the issue was raised by Malyala Rajaiah, a minister from our madiga community, during Zero Hour, with the permission of the Speaker, Pratibha Bharati, Naidu acknowledged that the MRPS demand was a fair one and promised to take it up soon after the elections to the Lok Sabha in 1996. Later, he called us to his chamber in the Assembly and requested us to call off the Assembly muttadi. Without budging, we demanded that he reiterate his promise in the presence of the lakhs of madigas who had congregated on the occasion. We then converted the Assembly muttadi into a public meeting. On that day, at the Babu Jagjivan Ram statue, Naidu announced his government's support for our demand.

Accordingly, the Justice Ramchandra Raju Commission was announced on 2 September 1996. The commission was given a one-year term. We demanded that the

decision should be taken within three months. The government asked for six months. During this period, we concentrated on further campaigns and organizational work.

Q: Please tell us about the forms of struggle that you developed and used and also how the categorization demand was formulated. We would like to know the ground issues too —for instance, which sections supported your demands and which did not. Also tell us about the issue of self-respect and about other cultural issues taken up by the Dandora movement.

KM: When the Commission's report was not submitted even after six months and nothing happened, we organized a padayatra on Ambedkar's birthday on 14 April [in 1997]. It began from Chandrababu Naidu's native village Naravaripalle, where we submitted a request to Naidu's mother to tell her son to resolve the issue in a speedy manner. Naidu's mother spoke to him on the phone about the madiga issue. We gave a Hyderabad digbandham [blockade] call as a protest against the delay. The padayatra was to culminate in the month of July with a huge rally in Hyderabad. Apprehending a law and order problem, the state government constituted a cabinet subcommittee consisting of K. Chandrasekhar Rao, Tammineni Sitaram and Nimmala Kistappa from the three regions of Telangana, Andhra and Rayalaseema respectively, and within two days issued a government order (GO) subcategorizing SC reservations. We reached Hyderabad in lakhs and duly expanded the scope of our demand from education and employment to include the welfare and political fields. GO No. 183 was issued to confer welfare benefits to madigas on the basis of population; this would hold up to the district level. The Naidu government pleaded inability to include political reservations, as this fell under the purview of the Union government.

The Justice Ramchandra Raju Commission raised the issue that it is not just the madigas who are discriminated against; that there are much more backward castes, such as relli and mehtar, who have never tasted the benefits of reservations. We submitted that our struggle is against discrimination, and therefore we are for the distribution of a fair share for these castes too. Then the Commission asked us how it should be done.

Q: Is that how the ABCD idea evolved? And how did you want it to work?

KM: The idea is that mala and mala sub-castes, madigas and madiga sub-castes, adi-andhra and relli are four categories. We submitted in writing that castes like rellis, who are the most backward, should be given priority, followed by the next most backward, the madigas, then the malas, and finally, the adi-andhras. The principle is that 1) the most backward and discriminated must be given priority and 2) the share should be according to their proportion in the population.

Some madiga intellectuals called for a meeting protesting against my position giving priority to the rellis over the madigas. They even threatened to withdraw support. I told them clearly that I was in favour of a struggle based on principle. I asked them to introspect on how they were different from the malas if they opposed this sub-categorization. I made it clear that I was not fighting for the selfish interests of some people, but for justice to the most oppressed castes.

The GO for the ABCD classification was issued. A GO for the just distribution of welfare funds was issued. The ABCD GO was struck down by the Andhra Pradesh High Court on the ground that it was issued without consulting the SC/ST Commission. Meanwhile, elections for the Lok Sabha were declared in 1998 and we decided to continue the movement. It was around this time that Mala Mahanadu, headed by P.V. Rao, gave a call to the malas to defeat the TDP [Telugu Desam Party]. Their rally in Hyderabad was lathi-charged. The MRPS condemned the lathi charge. When P.V. Rao, who was a Congress leader, got a ticket to contest elections, Naidu did not accept his resignation [from his government job], and thereby prevented him from contesting. We protested against this also. Our stand was that if a group is agitating on an issue, the government ought to engage them in dialogue and convince them, rather than use violence on them.

Then our discussions with Naidu began. Since his government was supportive of the madigas and there was a sharp opposition from the malas, who had openly declared support to the Congress party, Naidu asked us to support the TDP in the elections. We demanded that the TDP give proportional representation to the madigas in the elections: that is, TDP tickets for four out of the six reserved constituencies for the SC. In response, Naidu offered three reserved and one open seat to the madigas. He also offered a ticket to me to contest from the Peddapally reserved parliamentary constituency. I promptly refused, and then he offered me the Siddipet ticket. I expressed my disinclination to contest elections. That year, Manda Jagannadham, Malyala Rajaiah, Dr Suguna Kumari and Ratnam were fielded as candidates. The Congress spread the rumour that I had sold out to the TDP and was rallying the madigas against the Congress. The fact of the matter was that the TDP was instrumental in realizing our categorization demand, which the Congress was against. Also, the TDP offered four seats to the madigas in contrast to the Congress, which had favoured the malas. I demanded that even the CPI (M) should allot a ticket to a madiga candidate. There was a madiga leader in the CPI (M) who had been working for the party in Nellore for twenty-five years. Despite this, the party preferred to field a mala woman, who was working as a teacher. It was at this time that Krupakar Madiga, without informing me, met CPI (M) leaders and lobbied for the Nellore MP ticket.

At the time of its formation, MRPS had resolved to commit itself to the struggle and stay away from political parties. But in the context of elections, the question of MRPS's stand vis-à-vis parties cropped up. We had to explain that the madigas were merely supporting the party that had shown support to the community.

After the elections, we realized that Naidu was once again resorting to delaying tactics on the categorization issue. To put pressure on him, I went on an indefinite hunger strike. We chose Bansilalpet as the venue for my strike, well protected by atmahuti dalams (self-immolation squads). At midnight, the police pounced on the shibiram. They indiscriminately lathi-charged the dalam members in charge of it and arrested me.

At this time, the chairman of the SC/ST Commission, Shri H. Hanumanthappa, spoke up against the categorization issue. Under pressure from MRPS, the TDP government had issued an ordinance notifying the categorization of SCs into ABCD. During the course of the indefinite hunger strike, some youth tried to immolate themselves and one Tellaballa Ravi from Anantapur died. I was arrested and admitted to the NIMS Hospital. Krupakar Madiga, who was next in line in the leadership, instead of continuing the struggle, took shelter in some politician's residence. After I was discharged from the hospital, I sought an explanation from him. He replied brusquely, 'We cannot cooperate with you if you resort to violent methods at will.' He opposed the state committee decision to continue the fast after my arrest and walked out of the MRPS. I issued a statement saying that Krupakar was a mere actor in the drama meant to weaken the Dandora movement. That drama was directed by Kadiyam Srihari and produced by Chandrababu Naidu.

The Mala Mahanadu continued to oppose MRPS and the categorization ordinance, which was sent by the governor to the President of India for his consent. While the state was ruled by the TDP, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance was in power at the Centre. K.R. Narayanan, a Congress dalit, was the President of India.

Once again, we sought to activate our demand by taking out a Dandora Dandayatra, a padayatra of 36,000 km, starting from Srikakulam and covering the entire state, beginning in January and culminating in a Hyderabad digbandham on 14 April 1999. April is the time when the Assembly is in session. When the padayatra reached Ibrahimpatnam, I was arrested and prevented from going ahead. Led by Raga Satyam, Mary [Madiga], Varalakshmi and Shobha Rani, some MRPS members entered the Assembly. They were severely beaten up. Narsimhulu, who was a Congress MLA, strongly criticized the government. The government was forced to take up the issue and see to it that the Assembly resolution was passed in favour of categorization. This was the first Assembly resolution on the ABCD issue.

In the meantime, the President of India gave his consent to the categorization of dalits. Based on that, the Act was passed unanimously by the state Assembly in 2000. From then to 4 November 2004, categorization was implemented. The full bench of the state high court, under Justice Liberhan, extended support to it.

With a view to safeguard categorization and focus on wider social issues, we started the Mahajana Sangarshana Samiti (MSS) in 2001. From 7 October to 7 December, we conducted cycle yatras in support of the samajika praja Telangana state demand and the implementation of the GO 610.[2]

The MRPS and MSS also agitated for the regularization of the SC and ST employees' promotions. The MRPS has been aiming at overall social welfare while fighting for the interests of the madigas. When Naidu's government introduced the midday meal scheme in government schools, in many villages in coastal Andhra where the meal was cooked by dalit women, caste Hindus boycotted it. In some places they took their children out of the schools. On International Women's Day, we organized the Dalita Mahila Atmagourava Sabha with the demand that those responsible for the above development must be booked under the SC/ST Atrocities Act.

We organized a meeting in Nizam College demanding the dismissal of the Narendra Modi government following the violence in Gujarat, with the slogan 'Dalit–Muslim bhai bhai' in the place of 'Hindu–Muslim bhai bhai'. The Jamiat-Ulema-i-Hind's national president was overwhelmed by the dalit solidarity. In 2003, by-elections were held for the Madira constituency. TDP proposed to give me a ticket. Instead, I contested as an independent candidate. All this was part of the Mahajana Sangarshana Samiti activity.

During the counting of votes, a poor Muslim came to me with her daughter. The girl, Naseema, was suffering from a heart ailment. To meet the medical expenses, her father, who was a rickshaw puller, even sold his rickshaw—the source of his livelihood. He approached many people for help, to no avail. Moved by his plight, I asked him to give me ten days' time.

Ten days after Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy [YSR] took over as chief minister of the state, I went to his camp office to meet him with Naseema and her parents. He called Jannat Hussain and introduced me to him as a social activist and fighter for just causes and instructed him to accord priority to me. I explained Naseema's case and sought his help. Immediately he issued instructions sanctioning 25,000 rupees from the CM's relief fund. The expenditure for the heart operation was estimated to be around 1.4 lakh rupees. The CM expressed the view that if such an amount were to be sanctioned, the entire state budget would be spent only in treating such children. Following a heated debate, I told the CM that I would campaign for this issue. I asked Naseema's parents for two months' time. I convened an MRPS state committee meeting and resolved to take up this issue.

During the months of June–July, I conducted a survey of children with congenital heart problems. Putting aside my MRPS work, I undertook a whirlwind tour of the state. On 6 August, we conducted a meeting in Chandraiah Gardens. Following this, we conducted a seminar in Ambedkar Bhavan, inviting politicians, representatives of people's organizations, media members and intellectuals, as well as prominent doctors who would be the expert speakers, to create awareness about the disease and to find a solution to it. We selected ten children to speak to the media.

One of the boys, Shoban, died in the morning. His father brought the body onto the dais. In fact, it could be said that the movement began with this incident. We walked in procession over tank bund to Ambedkar statue. Most of the children with congenital heart ailment who assembled in Hyderabad with their parents joined this procession. The tank bund was blocked and traffic came to a standstill. The police, disturbed by the seriousness of the situation, called up the CM, who was in Delhi. The CM was then in the midst of a press conference. He threatened me with dire consequences if I did not call off the agitation. All this was telecast live. We continued our protest. At 7 p.m., compelled by the situation, the CM made a statement from Delhi, assuring agitators that he would order a comprehensive survey and that the government would bear the medical expenses of all the children who had gathered in Hyderabad. We continued district-wise reviews, tests and health camps for a year and then met the CM. The CM received me respectfully and told me that this movement had, in fact, inspired him to start the 'Arogyasri' scheme, under which the poor were given free advanced medical treatment. He announced it in the Assembly, openly acknowledging the movement led by the MRPS.

During the tenure of the TDP, a mala minister, Suddala Devaiah, had been suspended from the cabinet on the basis of a mere news report alleging his involvement in a murder case. Mala Mahanadu did not even bother to protest. It was the MRPS that organized protests, dharnas and rasta rokos, even though Devaiah was critical of MRPS and the categorization demand. Our message was very clear: when upper-caste ministers were involved in police cases and were even attending courts, they were allowed to continue as ministers, why this different yardstick for a dalit minister? Devaiah was not reinstated. As a compromise, another dalit MLA, Babu Mohan, was made labour minister.

After the success of our movement for those children, we took up the demand for reservations in the private sector. When the case of the categorization came up before the Supreme Court, we camped in Delhi for fifteen days and resolved to continue the struggle. I stepped aside and made a Muslim the convenor of MSS. For the next three years, we continued our struggle by taking up padayatras, dharnas, rasta rokos and conducting meetings. In December 2006, we organized an all-party meeting. We met

YSR along with Congress minister Koneru Ranga Rao and Congress MP Nandi Yellaiah to demand that he should lead an all-party delegation to Delhi to represent the categorization demand. We threatened to disturb the Congress plenary session if this was not done. Ultimately, we succeeded in this. Then the government invited us for discussions. We, MRPS representatives, went with [the famous civil liberties lawyers, K.G.] Kannabiran and [K.] Balagopal. The CM promised to take up the issue. As a result, the Centre constituted the Justice Usha Mehra Commission in 2007. Mala Mahanadu demanded a national commission that, rather than being confined only to Andhra Pradesh, would cover the whole country. We opposed that and got the prime minister to announce that the commission was meant only for the state [since the larger scope would only delay matters]. The commission took one year to submit its report.

As part of a larger agenda with a human angle, we took up the issue of the rights of the disabled. This was the result of a meeting with disabled students, who approached us in Visakhapatnam during our campaign in the context of the Usha Mehra Commission's visit to Andhra Pradesh. We visited their hostel and, in the course of a night's discussion, came to some understanding of their problems. Then I met the chairman of the corporation for the disabled, Amruth Rao, and later officials in the Welfare Bhavan and collected information on the disabled. Armed with this information and perspective, we met on 28 August in the New MLA Quarters and formed the Vikalangula Hakkula Porata Samiti [Disabled Rights Struggle Committee] with Kolli Nageswar Rao as the convenor. We prepared a charter of thirty-six demands, with a focus on pension for the disabled, promotions, a Louis Braille park and support for inter-caste marriages, among others.

We organized a massive public meeting in the Nizam College grounds on 26 November 2007. More than a lakh supporters from practically every district gathered there and political party representatives participated too. We moulded this into a movement. In pursuit of our demands, we organized a huge dharna in front of the Jagjivan Ram statue. The disabled activists protected me from the police with kerosene and petrol bottles. The government invited me for talks, but simultaneously lathi-charged the disabled protesters. They put up a valiant resistance by throwing petrol and kerosene on the police and ministers. This disrupted the negotiations. When the government realized the strength of our resistance, it deputed two ministers, Rajyalaxmi and Mukesh Goud, to hold talks with us, promising that they would take a decision and make an announcement on 3 December, International Disabled Day. When the government failed to keep its word, we declared that December as 'Black Month' and worked to spread the movement to the whole state. By March, we had considerably intensified it. We also undertook an indefinite hunger strike in Abids [a major commercial centre in Hyderabad] on top of a four-storeyed building to prevent the police from approaching us or interrupting our fast. During the Assembly session, the

government agreed to our demands and announced pension of up to Rs 700 per month, the setting up of a Braille park, special provisions like ramps for the disabled in public buildings, reservations in jobs and promotions, and so on.

When the Usha Mehra Commission report was delayed, I sat on an indefinite hunger strike and got its submission speeded up.

During the Karimnagar elections, the MRPS extended support to the Congress candidate on the condition that the government would restore LIDCAP (Leather Industries Development Corporation of AP Ltd) lands in Gachibowli [which were given to some Singapore company by YSR], speed up the submission of Usha Mehra Commission report and arrange for the issuance of certificates to the SC sub-castes by the MRO (Mandal Revenue Officer).

YSR got our support in the elections, but when Jupudi Prabhakar Rao of the Mala Mahanadu conducted a meeting in Vijayawada, he also attended that. A few days before that, YSR had called me and Jupudi and tried to woo us with MLC seats and a ministerial berth as a quid pro quo for not raising the subcategorization demand. I simply rejected the offer and vowed to continue the struggle.

Q: Apart from the struggle aspect, what is the role of the MRPS in bringing about social and cultural awareness within the community and in society as a whole? How has it influenced the debate in society?

KM: The issue that has a wider significance is that of welfare schemes. According to the Ramakrishna Raju Commission recommendations, in the last five decades, madigas got only 20,000 jobs, which means that they lost 70,000 jobs that were due to them. Because of the ABCD categorization, in four years, we got around 20,000 jobs. This is a major achievement. The educational levels also saw an improvement. During these four years, madiga presence in higher educational institutions—medicine, universities—increased discernibly.

Q: Since the majority of the madigas are agricultural labour, what is your take on the land question?

KM: In contrast to its involvement with the reservation issue, the MRPS state leadership is not inclined towards land struggles due to the fact that these are long-run, protracted struggles. The land struggle is not like the struggles for promotion, facilities for the disabled or heart ailment issues, which can be resolved within a time frame and results seen. Local MRPS leaders do, in fact, work on issues such as the distribution of government lands. Mandal and district committees also focus on land issues. This is done under the direction of the state committee. Before the emergence of the MRPS, the resolution of every issue, whether family disputes, land or border disputes, saw the

involvement of politicians and upper castes. Today it is the MRPS which plays that role —from the level of local police station to that of the MRO to the collector, right up to the level of the CM.

From a stage of subservience and dependence on the upper-caste elite, the madigas have risen to the level of not just agitating for the rights of madiga community alone, but also of taking up broader social causes. There is a clear consolidation of madiga leadership from the village level to the state level.

Q: You are working primarily at the level of the government, with administration and policy, than at the level of the state. In other words, your movement does not seem to be a movement for state power. There is an interesting political shift. The older idea of politics is to look for state power. This is a new form of political understanding, to work with the existing institutions, but at the same to transform them with new demands. The demands are on governmental institutions not on civil society institutions. You are not working at the old political level of state power, but neither is this civil society activism. This is really a different kind of politics.

KM: That is true. To make the government work, we need to have the organizational structure at all levels corresponding to that of the government.

The major difference between the MRPS and other caste associations is that, while the latter have no strong grass-roots level organization but only leaders at the top, the MRPS has, as part of the long struggle, built up leadership from village to mandal to district to state level. We need to have leaders to articulate the issue and mass support to put pressure on the administration.

Q: Can you give us an example?

KM: For instance, when an atrocity on an SC or ST occurs in a village, we need local-level leadership to register the case in the police station. If there is no MRPS leadership to file the case there, in all likelihood, it will end up in a compromise. Because of MRPS, the case gets registered in the local police station and pursued at the DSP level. This happens only because of a leadership capable of fighting for justice.

Take the case of land disputes or getting pattas, which has to be taken up at the MRO level. We petition the MRO. If he or she does not act, or delays action on the petition, we mobilize people and agitate. If the necessary action is not taken, the higher-level committee of the MRPS approaches the higher officer and agitates for the necessary corrective action. Therefore, there are different levels of organizational response and they work in coordination with each other and in different phases.

Q: This whole work requires a high level of discipline and ideological outlook in the cadre. How is the MRPS cadre trained?

KM: Every MRPS meeting is a training exercise. On a regular basis, once in six months, we have special training camps for the cadre. We invite specialists like doctors and professors for these camps.

Q: There is a criticism that though the MRPS is militant, except for the top leaders, there is no political and ideological maturity among the cadre.

KM: MRPS is a large organization. At the state and district level, the leadership is highly disciplined and ideologically committed. There could be a certain sloppiness in the mandal- and village-level cadre perhaps. In such a large organization, it is not possible to have a cent per cent politically conscious leadership. It is also partly because of the influence of the dominant parties and the family background of these cadre. We make them take an oath that they are not to be affiliated to any party, yet the influence of the dominant parties can be seen, especially at the grass roots. To combat this, in every meeting, MRPS focuses on the training of our cadre by intellectuals, professionals and experts.

MRPS has a clear view on state power. Until we achieve the categorization we seek, we will use vote as an instrument. If there is an alliance between the Congress and TRS, nobody thinks there is anything wrong. But if we use vote as an instrument to put pressure on parties, it is wrong, is it? To benefit our community, we use our vote power.

Krupakar Madiga

‘Both the dalit movement and the madiga movement are campaigns for social respect, dignity, representation.’ Krupakar Madiga, founding general secretary of the MRPS, or ‘Dandora’, elaborates: ‘Though—given the fact that some scheduled castes have thus far enjoyed a major share in reservations in all states—the categorization demand is primary, it is necessary to appreciate that the madiga movement is not merely reservation-focused. Significant ideological, political and social transformations underlie the classification demand.’

Krupakar is one among the leaders of the movement who took on the caste surname ‘Madiga’ in an assertion of madiga self-confidence and pride. Today, if madigas are justifiably proud of their way of life, their knowledge and their cultural forms, if they have powerfully articulated their grievances about not having received a due share of the reservations that scheduled castes are entitled to, if they have a critique of and a vision for Indian society, the upsurge around the MRPS and similar organizations in other states is largely responsible.

Krupakar Madiga was born in 1966 in Karumanchi, near Ongole. His father, Jeevaratnam, was a madiga cobbler and his mother Rajalakshmi, a brahmin. Both were agricultural workers. The children (four girls and three boys) too worked as farm labour. They grew up in a mixed religious culture—liberal Hindu (on his mother’s side) and Baptist Christian (his father). The girls had Hindu names, the boys Christian ones. ‘There was never enough food, and I could never go to school during the agricultural season, which ran from June to March. I earned a daily wage of five rupees (in the late 1970s). Life was so terrible that I would sometimes run away and hide in a mango orchard and survive on mangoes,’ he recalls. During the drought of the mid-’70s, the whole family was hospitalized for several days, and two of his sisters died, because they had eaten some spoilt grain. ‘Because of all this I dropped out of school when in class five, though I really wanted to study and did quite well in class. I would read everything I found—a scrap that was flying around, wrappers, waste newspaper, old books. I actually taught myself from guide books that other children had discarded. I was very interested in learning.’

An opening of sorts came late in 1978 when the landlord’s son, Lakshmanna Reddy, a Communist Party of India (Marxist) intellectual, took Krupakar with him ‘from the tobacco fields and grading factories of Tangutur to Guntur where he was teaching, and

got me a job as a cleaner in the Reddy Hostel there'. For his meals and a wage of sixty rupees a month, he would rise at four in the morning, wash the 150 or so plates from the previous night's dinner, help with the cooking, and then clean the toilets and sweep and swab the students' rooms. Then he had to wash up after breakfast and lunch. In addition, he was required to water the 100 or so coconut trees in the hostel compound. At 10 p.m., he would lie down to sleep alone in the dining hall. 'I would cry, pray and sleep. That was the point, I think, at which I became an atheist. There was no god who could see my suffering.'

A Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) member who worked in the library helped him borrow books. So he managed to read a great deal: novels, histories of communist struggles, biographies of leaders. 'I wanted to join a night school, but there was too much work. They moved me from the private hostel to one of the university hostels, but there was little respite. Finally I got to be an assistant in the reading room.' Most Class IV employees in the university were those whose lands had been taken over for the campus. They liked him because 'I was fair, clever'. In 1982, his job became permanent. He had better conditions of work, continued to read and began watching films.

Meanwhile Krupakar had come into contact with Marxist–Leninist student organizations like the Progressive Democratic Students Union and the Radical Students' Union. 'Until then, I was a shy, frightened person. But going with them to the villages—we would go with nothing in our pockets; they would feed us—drumming, singing, giving speeches, I lost that nervousness. I thought: "I can. I can answer, I can speak." That was very important. After that, however late it was, however dark the forest, whoever the people were, I went—fearlessly.

'I began to feel that I had a lot to say and that I could educate others; my knowledge came from my experience and the people around me. In 1984, I resigned from my permanent job at the university and joined politics PDSU full-time. I had four gurus: Mao, Ambedkar, Jesus and Buddha. Mao had said, "People are our teachers; society our university." Ambedkar had studied hard, become a national leader, emancipated dalits. I wanted to be like him. Jesus had said that the poor would inherit the earth and that, for the rich man, getting to heaven would be as difficult as it was for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. The Buddha preached that one should not crave worldly things. I felt I did not need a job. A job would only be for myself. I wanted to work for society.'

Then, in 1985, the massacres at Karamchedu took place. That was another turning point. Krupakar took active part in the bandhs, the rasta rokos and other activities that followed. 'The Maoists said that Katti Padma Rao and the Dalit Mahasabha were splitting the movement. The Mahasabha had a strong argument. It said: "We will conduct

the struggle. You [the Marxists] should support us from outside. The leadership must remain with the dalits." It was a very important struggle—and a dalit leadership emerged. Even for the communists, it was a positive moment. They understood how caste works as an oppressive ideology.

'After Karamchedu, very important questions were raised in the party. Dalits asked why, if the party supported reservations nationally, there was no reservation within the party. Why were there no dalits in policy-level committees, in the politburo? Were the communists becoming alienated from the poor because of this? Was that why they could not provide any real leadership in so many important struggles?' In 1990, Krupakar left the party. In 1991, the Chunduru massacre took place.

Between 1985 and 1991, tremendous changes had taken place. The dalit vision had sharpened. They read Ambedkar, Phule, Sahu Maharaj, rationalist literature; learnt about the history of dalits in Andhra Pradesh. There was a huge turnout for the Dalit Mahasabha meetings in the Guntur area where Krupakar was elected its general secretary in 1991. They organized a rasta roko in front of Alapathi Dharma Rao's (the Speaker of the Assembly at the time) house. There was a lathi charge. Then came the 'Chalo Delhi, Chalo Parliament' programme. Motkupalli Narasimhulu, who had stood against P.V. Narasimha Rao in the elections, led the group. Krupakar says: 'We met younger parliamentarians like [Ram Vilas] Paswan. It was the first time that dalit parliamentarians had been required to come out and identify with a dalit issue at the national level. We had a charter of demands for the President, but he refused to meet us. That was the point at which the "This State is Not Ours; We Need a Dalit President" demand was born.

'After Karamchedu, the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act was passed. But it was only in 1995 that the implementation rules were framed. These rules decreed that the court would come to the victims; that there would be a special prosecutor, rehabilitation, compensation. Another consequence was that in all parties—even the BJP—dalit representation increased. But political cultures did not change much. Political parties were controlled by the upper castes; dalits were restricted to the field or to the SC/ST cell. Real change, ideological, political, organizational and cultural, took place after 1994—after Dandora! There was talk even of a Dalit Bahujan Communist Party. The Dalit Mahasabha was formed in 1985 in the context of the Karamchedu struggle. The initial demand was for justice and punishment of the perpetrators. After the 1990 Chunduru massacres, the question of compensation and rehabilitation was also raised.'

The 1990s were also the time of 'the Kanshi Ram–BSP wave'. Proportional representation was one of the BSP's slogans. But the Dalit Mahasabha was not very responsive. When asked whether the fact that Kanshi Ram was a chamar (madiga),

while the Mahasabha was mala-dominated, had anything to do with it, Krupakar points out that the mala domination is evident everywhere. Welfare schemes benefit malas; roads, houses, schools are built in malapalles, not madigapalles; malas are the SC representatives on selection committees; they have a monopoly over SC political representation.

Krupakar traces the beginnings of the Dandora idea to the meeting of the Southern States Adi Jambava Arundathiyar Samakhya in early 1994, which was attended by madiga teachers, administrators and political workers. The discussions were an eye-opener. In every state, some castes had enjoyed much of the benefit of reservations (in Andhra Pradesh, the malas). It was in this meeting that the demand for the ABCD categorization in SC reservations was first articulated. In late 1994, a meeting was organized on the Nizam College grounds. Konneru Ranga Rao, who was home minister in Kotla Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy's Congress government at the time, presided. T.N. Sadalakshmi was one of the main speakers. The turnout was huge. The demand for categorization was officially raised in the state. Krupakar attended this meeting as a follower of Katti Padma Rao.

'At a meeting held a few days later, in the hall of the Jewett Memorial Centenary Baptist Church in Ongole, a few of us decided we should work full-time—maybe for five to seven years—to get this legislation through. On 7 July, a meeting was held in Edumudi village, Prakasam district, and decided to form the MRPS. On 17 July, in Chirala, which is close to Karamchedu, a meeting in memory of Karamchedu martyrs was planned. It was attended by university teachers, judges, IAS officers. We had distributed leaflets widely, demanding classification of SC reservations in the meeting. It turned into a mala versus the others event. Gaddar, who had come for the meeting, supported us. That really encouraged us.'

The MRPS activists bought twenty-five bicycles and fanned out into the villages—on foot, on cycles, on red buses. They went to all the 100 villages in the Ongole division and organized a huge meeting on 25 August under the MRPS banner. They reached out to madigas as a whole, but especially to the educated youth who were jobless and to school dropouts. 'We said: "Upper-caste political parties have deceived us, governments have deceived us, social systems have deceived us. We must not remain silent. The stone that has been cast out will become the cornerstone." The results were amazing. The aim was to build a sustainable local leadership, able to speak up, write petitions, organize press meets using government guest houses.

'People came to the meetings on their own, on cycles, walking, holding banners they themselves had made. They brought food and shared it with people who had come from further away. They made contributions of Rs 5, Rs 10, Rs 100. "We have never seen so many madigas together; it is like a festival," they said. All this inspired us. We went all

out. Held at least ten meetings that year: Kandukuru, Kanigiri, Markapuram and Darsi, among other places. Usually by-elections would see only mala candidates; we put up a madiga—he got 15,000 votes. "Next time a Zila Parishad chairman, an MLA, …" we decided. The expansion began. In 1995, we held an anniversary meeting to which people came from all over the state: madiga intellectuals, activists, supporters from other groups. I became the state co-convenor. We held meetings in all districts. Before every meeting, I would go to the place, meet all the people involved, sort out problems; I also wrote many of the pamphlets, coined slogans, designed posters, wrote memoranda, met the press, held discussions with groups in every corner of the state. It is a matter of special satisfaction that, using Dandora as a model, many other groups emerged and extended their demands.'

On 2 March 1996, they had another meeting at Nizam College grounds, which overflowed with people. 'The movement had had a big impact on civil society. The Dandora cause was recognized by the people as well as by political parties. Distributive justice with human dignity is the demand. Today we have come a long way in relation to the former and also achieved a certain pride, a self-strengthening madiga pride. The initiatives around the question of identity should never be underestimated,' Krupakar observes. The categorization movement has run into a roadblock with the Supreme Court judgment. Krupakar continues to work actively for the cause and is a regular commentator on the issue in Telugu journals and newspapers. Translated here are two such contributions, published in the widely circulated newspaper *Andhra Jyothi*, one written in 2005 and the other in 2008, both when he was president of MRPS.

He has published *Madiga Dandora: Yedu Vyasalu* (Madiga Dandora: Seven Essays, 2001) and co-edited with Joopaka Subhadra a collection of madiga poetry, *Kaitunakala Dandem: Madiga Kavitvam* (2008). As editor of *Dandora Prachuranalu*, a publication initiative started in 1999, focusing on the life and culture of madigas and other oppressed sub-castes, he has published four books. He is currently editor of *Jambaveeyam,* a quarterly magazine started in 2012, which focuses on the society, culture and literature of depressed classes.

With So Many Barriers, How Can Unity Be Possible?

Translated by N. Manohar Reddy

Of late, there have been several discussions between a few madiga and mala intellectuals, leaders and officials. More are expected to follow. During these discussions, mala intellectuals and leaders have proposed that both communities set aside the classification of SC reservations issue and fight together on issues of land, reservations in the private sector, the establishment of a nodal agency, gaining state power and so on. However, madiga intellectuals and leaders have made it clear to them that as long as the malas do not stop creating hurdles, and actually start cooperating, in the demand for classification of reservation based on the population ratio, unity between the two castes will not be possible. A few intellectuals and leaders from both sides have argued that issues of gaining state power, land and other issues of common interest are more important than classification. They proposed the formation of a united forum and a united movement. With that it looked as though unity had been achieved among some leaders of these two castes. However, it must be understood that this unity chant is a ploy to weaken the Madiga Dandora movement. We do believe that some of these leaders may be honest in their endeavour. It is in this context that some of us, on behalf of the madigas, have put forward a few concrete proposals pertaining to the conditions in which unity between the two castes might become feasible. If mala intellectuals, leaders and elders agree on the following facts and the just cause they represent, we believe unity is not impossible.

1. Malas have to recognize the fairness of the struggle of the madigas, rellis, mehtars and the others in the state's fifty-nine scheduled castes, and their demand for reservations—in the fields of education, employment, politics and welfare—based on the ratio of these castes in the population. To this effect, a team of mala representatives should meet the chief minister, prime minister, UPA chairperson and the Justice Usha Mehra Commission (appointed by the Central government to look into the SC reservation classification issue), and demand that these constitutional authorities and officials get a law passed in Parliament to facilitate classification.
2. Malas should accept the principle of micro-level distribution of opportunities in the public and private sectors of education, employment, politics and economy to each of the fifty-nine scheduled castes based on their population ratio. Malas must accept that only such a reservation policy will help forge unity among the madigas, malas and other scheduled castes. They must become truly proactive with regard to the classification issue.
3. Malas must be able to recognize that the goal of achieving reservation based on classification is progressive, of prime significance and also a joint responsibility.
4. Malas should forgo the surplus opportunities (going by the criterion of population ratio) that they have had at all levels in the fields of education, employment,

financial projects, leadership positions in political parties and so on. They have to ensure that the positions they forgo should go to the people belonging to madiga, dekkali, chindu, baindla, relli and mehtar castes, who have had the least representation until now.

5. Malas should not create legal and technical hurdles in achieving classification. They have to proclaim that classification is a normal phenomenon of social justice and that they too will strive to achieve that goal.
6. Malas have to accept that it is not possible to build a robust, united dalit movement without letting each scheduled caste enjoy its share of that small amount of reservation offered by the government.
7. In the past, the reddys established a Sarvajanaabhyudaya Porata Samiti [literally 'organization to fight for the progress of all'] in order to prevent the mala victims of Chunduru from getting justice. They attacked dalits. Recently, the upper castes have established a Citizens' Forum to work against the creation of OBC reservation. They filed a case against OBC reservation in the Supreme Court. Similarly, now, some mala leaders and the leaders of Mala Mahanadu have been trying hard to prevent the most depressed castes among the SCs—the madigas, rellis and other sub-castes—from attaining social justice through classification. They have exerted pressure on the state and central governments, the Justice Usha Mehra Commission and the National SC Commission to act against the classification policy. Malas should declare such leaders as antisocial elements and anti-dalit forces. They themselves have to take the initiative to put an end to their leaders' faults and place a check on their lobbying power.
8. Why do the same mala leaders, who make a noise about social empowerment, social justice and the welfare of dalits, adivasis and weaker sections, fail to talk in support of the reservation classification? It is high time they openly demonstrated their commitment to democratic values by speaking out in support of SC classification.
9. Malas have to appeal to the state and central governments to appoint special officers (just as there are liaison officers in all government sections to look into the matters pertaining to SCs) who will ensure equal representation of each dalit caste in reservation.
10. Finally, malas must realize that political unity cannot be achieved without first achieving social unity. Mala leaders and intellectuals have to express their complete willingness to live with madigas as equals by accepting inter-caste marriages, celebrating festivals together and sharing their resources and joy in humanitarian, material and spiritual spheres. They should demonstrate that they are in no way superior to madigas. Only then will the distrust between malas and madigas wither away and real brotherhood, equality and unity be established.

Otherwise, the life of malas and madigas will become a struggle between two camps of slaves, who, like gladiators, fight and provide entertainment to upper-caste rulers. In such circumstances, the unity of malas and madigas may only play out as a tragic drama.

What Has the All-Party Front Achieved?

Translated by N. Manohar Reddy

Will the 2005 monsoon session of Parliament come to an end without the classification of SC reservations being put into place? We know that the madiga, relli and other groups of castes have been seeking justice for quite some time. Will their hopes be damned? Recently, an All-Party Front went to Delhi and returned empty-handed after doing the rounds of MPs and other political leaders. Our elected leaders need to resolve the issue *within* Parliament. There is no point in trying to exert pressure outside Parliament. That's the job of activists. What the present situation tells us is that political parties have no serious investment in the classification issue.

The chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, YSR, has no regard for madigas. In the last ten months he visited Delhi thirty times, but he hasn't bothered to raise the issue of getting parliamentary approval for classification either with the prime minister or with Sonia Gandhi. Madigas have not received their due share in state government appointments that were made after his Congress government came into power. Although on 1 April 2000 the state Assembly had unanimously passed a law regulating classification in SC reservations, it was struck down by the Supreme Court on 5 November [2004]. The apex court has made it clear that only Parliament has the power to pass a law regarding the classification of SC reservations, not the state Assembly. With this judgment, madiga, relli and other groups of castes have been deprived of the reservation they had been enjoying for the last five years based on their population ratio. Their future has become uncertain once again, as they are forced to remain sanitation workers, leather workers, scavengers or migrant workers with no security of work or life.

Since classification has now been set aside, the madiga group of castes has lost their share in various government jobs which have been filled in the last ten months. Of late, 200 Group II SC posts have been filled. Out of these, going by the classification, madigas were supposed to get ninety-two, whereas they have got only twenty-two. The relli group of castes got just four when they should have been entitled to fourteen. As a result, the malas, in addition to getting their own share, bagged the jobs that the madiga

and relli castes lost. Similarly, 426 SC EAMCET [Engineering and Medical Common Entrance Test] seats were filled recently. Out of these, the madiga group of castes should have been entitled to 226, but they got only thirty. The relli group of castes were entitled to thirty-four but they got a mere four. Only the hungry know what hunger means; friends outside cannot. Those who play down the loss experienced by the madiga and relli castes in terms of education and jobs are the ones who have moved up past the index of hunger. In the present academic year itself, starting from residential schools to universities, the madiga and relli groups of castes have lost thousands of admissions due to the termination of the classification system. Such an unjust and discriminatory situation is allowed to arise and continue as the government did nothing in terms of corrective measures. In Nagarjuna University, while there are twenty-eight mala professors and teachers, there is only one madiga teacher. As the Justice Ramachandra Raju Commission has observed, out of all the SC employees, 70 per cent are mala, while the remaining 30 per cent are madiga. But the population figures for these two castes are in the reverse proportion.

In the past, mala leaders who enjoyed the positions of chief minister, Speakers, central ministers, primary and higher education ministers, ministers of labour, welfare and so on have systematically worked towards recruiting malas as government employees, higher officials and into other positions as well. Since no one from the madiga and relli castes could challenge this unjust practice, their job became even easier. This kind of 'internal exploitation' among the dalit castes is made possible by the existing reservation policy, where fifty-nine dalit castes are put under a single SC category without classification. It is against this arbitrary policy that the madiga and relli groups of castes have been waging a struggle of social justice for more than a decade. The malas raise a hue and cry because they are worried that they will lose the 'extra' opportunities they have been cornering. Brushing aside the madiga proposal that in future all SCs should get equal opportunities, they seem to believe in grabbing as much as possible first and talking about equal opportunity later. Moreover, they put forward the cunning argument that reservations are like 'slices of stale bread' or that they are 'alms offered by the upper castes' and so on, and argue that malas and madigas together should fight for 'common' issues, such as land and state power. They seem to be happy that they have been able to exploit madigas and rellis for the last sixty years. This is the attitude of an exploiter. It's hard to believe that they would be ready to share land and state power when they are not willing to share the benefits of reservation.

The Telugu Desam government too is not honest about classification. A law to this effect can be passed only in Parliament by making an amendment to Article 341 of the Constitution. This fact was deliberately kept secret by the Telugu Desam Party. Their dishonesty in this matter becomes all the more evident when we realize that although they had law-making power in Parliament, they evaded that responsibility. Their sole

interest was in madiga votes, so they passed the law in the state Assembly, instead of ensuring that it was done properly in Parliament. By making sure that it would be struck down by the Supreme Court, they fooled the madiga and relli groups of castes. The BJP, in their Kakinada State Committee meeting, had passed a resolution in favour of classification. But today, both the TDP and the BJP are silent on the issue. While they successfully boycotted this year's budget session of Parliament and decided not to enter Parliament until the corrupt ministers are dismissed, they pretended that they were powerless with regard to bringing in a law for classification. How do we understand the silence of even the Left parties, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party who had previously supported classification? Can the madigas trust them any longer? The Congress party has anyway put aside the classification issue as unresolved. It is just buying time by pretending to take steps to resolve the issue. It is unfortunate that Y.S. Rajashekhar Reddy's government is inclined to find only fake solutions. On 10 December last year [2004], the state Assembly passed a unanimous resolution appealing to the central government to take the necessary steps to get the SC classification law passed in Parliament. That must be appreciated. But after this resolution was passed, there is no evidence to show that the CM has taken any initiative to raise the issue with either Prime Minister Manmohan Singh or UPA [United Progressive Alliance] chairperson Sonia Gandhi. The present parliamentary session will come to an end without even a mention of classification. Isn't the state government responsible for this sorry state of affairs? In this state, the ruling and opposition parties are unanimously in favour of classification. Classification law will not put any additional economic burden on the government. What is more, it has already been successfully implemented for four years. Mala MLAs and ministers supported this law in the Assembly three times. All parties supported classification inside as well as outside the Assembly. The classification issue is crucial because it affects one-and-a-half crore dalits. If there is any issue in the state that demands urgent resolution today, it is the classification issue. Why hasn't the chief minister taken up such an important issue at the Delhi level? The state government has granted reservation to Muslims without consulting any party. It got clearance from the central government for the Pulichintala project in Guntur district without sending any 'all-party' delegation to Delhi. It is also trying to revive the Legislative Council without involving any all-party group. Then, what is it that is coming in the way of classification? Both the government and the opposition parties have turned the classification issue into a political game and are playing with the lives of madigas.

Nagappagari Sunderraju

Nagappagari Sunderraju's life story illustrates the contribution of the madiga movement to the making of ordinary madiga youth into activists, public intellectuals and academics. He was a poet, short-story writer, critic and activist when he joined as assistant professor in S.K. University, Anantapur. It is indeed a great loss to the madiga community and Telugu society that Sunderraju took his life in July 2000. As Darla Venkateswara Rao, who wrote Sunderraju's biography, *A Madiga Smruti* (2007), observes, 'Telugu literature has to recognize madiga sahityam as an important trend. Madiga literature invariably remembers Sunderraju. Therefore, Sunderraju will forever be remembered in the literary world.'

Sunderraju was born in 1968 in Nemakallu village, Kurnool district. His father was called Ranganna and mother Pedda Narsamma. Ranganna had studied up to the first form (sixth class). He used to run hostels for SC students in Aluru taluk with the funds provided by the government. This was before government-run social welfare hostels were started. When the Andhra Pradesh government decided to take over the hostels, it offered to absorb those who had been managing these hostels into its cadre. Ranganna refused the offer of this government job.

In a family of four children (two boys and two girls), Sunderraju was the second child and the eldest son in the family. 'Though we lived in a reddy-dominated village, my family never experienced untouchability. Madigas constitute one-third of the village population. My grandfather Nagappa was a teacher and he was also the village headman. Our joint family had 300 acres of land, twenty-five bullocks and other property. When the Land Ceiling Act was passed, we distributed some of our lands,' Anandaraju, Sunderraju's brother, told us. Sunderraju studied in Nemakallu up to the fifth class and in Guntakal up to the tenth. He did his intermediate in Pattikonda (1986–88) and BA in Anantapur (1988–91). Anandaraju remembers his brother complaining that in college he was sometimes treated as an untouchable, and saying that he found it difficult to accept or deal with that experience.

Sunderraju was like any ordinary dalit boy when he entered the Hyderabad Central University (HCU) in the 1990s. The Mandal moment had divided the university student community into anti-reservation and pro-reservation groups. All dalit students on the campus belonged to the pro-reservation group, which later came to be known as Progressive Students' Forum (PSF). The thin and very innocent-looking Sunderraju

became part of this group too. He used to write poetry, but there was nothing in his poems to distinguish them. He completed his MA and M.Phil degrees from HCU and experienced discrimination in the upper-caste-dominated Telugu department. When he appeared for his Ph.D interview in July 1994, one senior Professor actually called him a 'desadrohi' (anti-national). Sunderraju, who was an extremely sensitive person (and a poet at heart), got very upset and sought an apology from the professor. He wrote a poem to express his anger and also to reject this stereotypical view of a dalit student. This poem, 'Avunu, Nenu Desadrohini' (Yes, I Am Anti-national), clearly marks a break in Sunderraju's thinking and his arrival as a politically conscious dalit. He points out in the poem that he is anti-national because he refused to accept the authority and status given to the brahmin poets Nannayya and Vishwanatha and asserted his status as a human being in the brahmin-dominated Telugu department.

Sunderraju was one of the founding members of the Dr B.R. Ambedkar Students' Association and as well as the Dalit Sahitya Vedika in 1995. P. Rajasekhar and he were the editors of a collection of dalit poetry, *Gundedappu* (The Drumbeat of the Heart, 1995), which had poems by HCU students. They declared in the introduction that the Dalit Sahitya Vedika was formed to fight discrimination in the University, be it cultural, educational or literary. *Gundedappu* carried poems by students of the University. Sunderraju, Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, Koyi Koteswara Rao, G.V. Ratnakar, N. Ravi Kumar, Kanakaiah, Kattula Kishore and others emerged on the public sphere as a new generation of dalit poets in the context of these developments.

The waves of the madiga movement began spreading all over Andhra Pradesh from 1995 onwards. It is not surprising that Sunderraju published his first collection of poetry *Chandala Chatimpu* (1996) under the Madiga Sahitya Vedika (MSV) banner. This forum was later developed into a state-level organization that edited and introduced madiga poetry in the anthology *Madiga Chaitanyam* in January 1997. In the introduction to that volume, Sunderraju raised the question of the representation of madigas in the literary sphere. 'The questions raised by madigas are not limited to the issue of employment or to educational and political fields,' he wrote. 'These apply to literary and cultural fields too. What is the place of madigas in the literary field? How are madigas represented in the fields of literature or culture,' he asked and pointed out that there was an attempt to deliberately suppress the voices of madiga poets. For example, Katti Padma Rao had invited all dalit poets to the Press Club in Hyderabad to read their poetry on the occasion of the release of his book in July 2006. Many madiga poets read their poetry and raised the issue of sharing SC reservations. In the report that was subsequently written, the names of the madigas did not appear. Sunderraju called this a conspiracy in an interview to the journal *Ekalavya* in 1997.

Sunderraju issued an advertisement for contributions to the anthology of madiga literature and, in the process, discovered many new writers. He discussed these contributions with the poets, edited them and finally published the collection. In our meetings with them, a number of madiga writers told us about Sunderraju's contribution. 'MSV is an autonomous organization. It is not affiliated to any political party. It is not affiliated to the MRPS … MSV has a long-term purpose. Producing the literature necessary for the Dandora movement is the immediate cause for its formation, but the forum will continue till the oppression of madigas ends,' Sunderraju wrote, outlining his vision for MSV. He actively worked in the Madiga Atmagourava Porata Samiti (1998–99) as a member of its executive committee, along with Kolluri Chiranjeevi, Kishore Babu and others.

Sunderraju worked on short stories both for his M.Phil (1991–93) and his Ph.D (1994–98). His doctoral thesis on 'Rayalaseema Stories and the Portrayal of Geography' prepared the ground for his investigation into the question of language and geography. He successfully uses language as a marker of geography (Rayalaseema) and social setting (madigas in relation with the other castes in the village) in his critically acclaimed collection of short stories, *Madigodu* (1997). This collection depicts madiga life in the conversational language of his village Nemakallu and nearby villages. The literary critic Gudipati comments, 'In Rayalaseema, there is a huge gap between the language spoken in the village and that written in the books. Sunderraju portrayed madiga life in the everyday conversational language of his grandfather and grandmother. This is Sunderraju's distinction.'

My Heart That Is with Eera Reddy's Granddaughter

Translated by N. Manohar Reddy

My mother doesn't know the alphabet. When I ask her to learn it, she replies, 'You beggar-bastard, what will I do with education?' But my teacher says education teaches one many things and if you aren't educated, people will consider you a funny animal. Even before I set off to tell this to my mother, she declares, 'A washerperson is better than an educated person. And a shepherd is better than a washerperson. Then again, a barber is better than a shepherd. And, of course, a madiga is better than the barber.'

My mother's brothers call her Guvvakka (bird-sister). It is true that my mother looks like a tiny bird in its nest, but she is so smart that she knows everything that is happening

in this country. She knows that Eera Reddy's granddaughter and I are drawn to each other!

Eera Reddy has seven sons. Umakka is the daughter of the third son, Sinappa Reddy, who, I heard, is a doctor in Bangalore. All the other sons of Eera Reddy are abroad, either in some job or in business. Eera Reddy has a palatial house and 106 acres of land. The huge stock of grain and wealth that they have is enough to last them for three generations, even if they do nothing but sit idle and eat. Eera Reddy has two wives. The first one didn't have any children. But she is more concerned about the affairs of the family than the younger wife, who has given birth to seven boys and five girls.

Eera Reddy has a flour mill, a cotton mill, a car, a tractor and a three-storey building —with a poultry farm on the roof. He also has a large cattle pen. And there are people like Kenchamma from the madiggeri to work in his house. Eera Reddy has everything but he is not lucky enough to have his grandchildren around him. They live abroad and come to visit him once in a few years. Their visits are celebrated with such huge fanfare that one gets the impression that the whole village is involved in some festival. Eera Reddy doesn't like the idea of leaving the village permanently. And his sons are not in favour of leaving their children behind in the village either. However, after a lot of negotiation with his son Sinappa Reddy, Eera Reddy managed to bring his granddaughter Uma back from Bangalore to stay with him in the village.

The only school in our village is the government school. Everyone, whether a reddy child or a servant-madiga child, has to go to this school. My sister and I are different from others in the village. We are the first ones from the madiggeri to go to school. My sister is in the fourth class and I am in the third. Eera Reddy sent his granddaughter to school, escorted by a servant, and had her admitted to the third class. When Salmon [Solomon] teacher asked what her name was, she replied, 'Uma'.

To Eera Reddy's man, Salmon teacher said, 'You can go back now and tell Eera Reddy that Uma has been admitted. Come back at twelve to take her back because the morning session gets over at that time. Tell Eera Reddy that I asked after him.'

There is no one in our school who is the equal of Uma. She's come here after studying in Bangalore. She knows only English. She can speak our language, Telugu, but can't read or write it. When Salmon teacher said that from that day onwards she would be learning Telugu, the rest of the teachers—Anjaneyulu, the karanam teacher, Boodalla teacher and the lady teacher—smiled.

From the time I wake up in the morning until late in the night, my mother keeps on bothering me about one thing or the other. First, she tells me to brush my teeth, clean my tongue and wash my face clean. If I rush through these chores and sit down to eat, she will not spare me. If I argue back, she gives me a kick on the shins and makes me go back and do a thorough job of washing first. She insists that I bathe at least three times a

week. Everyone else in the village finds it hard to bathe once a month, but my mother forces me into it three times a week. The day we bathe, you can be sure that our bodies are battered. She scrubs away at our arms and legs. When she sees any dirt, she says, 'You are filthy! What's the use of your education if you haven't even learnt to keep yourselves clean? Why can't you wash yourselves when you get dirty and spare me all this trouble? Why can't you study for a while instead of playing in the mud twenty-four hours a day and creating this havoc?' Muttering these things, she would thrash us left and right on our backs with the aluminium mug.

When I go to school with my hair oiled and braided, the lady teacher would say, 'Your mother manages to send you to school so clean although she is not educated. She should really be appreciated.' When I report this to my mother, she would say, 'Enough, enough, you are getting too smart. You come up with these tales to escape my kicks.' If I said she could check with my sister Rani if she wanted, she would grow impatient and say, 'What does that dark face know? She is like a cow-dung cake on the wall. She nods her head for everything.' It is not easy to win over my mother. Even Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva together cannot defeat her when it comes to an argument. She could make the most arrogant man bow down in defeat. Many times I would go, ready with some plan or the other to escape her thrashing, but, sadly, I never had much success.

Sitting outside the big house and searching through my hair for lice, my mother said to aunt from the middle-house, 'Sister, look, how this bastard's hair has grown like a woman's.'

To this, the middle-house aunt replied, 'Don't act smart, my girl. The boy has already grown big. You should get his head shaved at least now. It's best for the child's health if the first shaving is done when he is a year old. If that is not possible, you should get it done at least before the third year is over. But you seem to believe otherwise. You think your son is exceptional. He is already growing a moustache, but you send him to school with his hair braided. So it is you who haven't bothered to get his head shaved and *you* should take the blame, not the innocent boy.'

'You say he is innocent? Your head is not screwed on right! He might look tiny but he does all kinds of things. It's only been a short while since Eera Reddy's granddaughter has joined the school and this fellow is already eyeing her. In no time they've become friends and are playing the ball game, the closing-eyes game, the pinching-nose game, the bodlakaaya game, the pituku game—you name them! Even when the other uppercaste children threatened to thrash him, he was not willing to part from her. One day, the karanam teacher warned the girl, "He is a madiga boy and you're a reddy girl. You shouldn't be touching him." But she too doesn't seem to care. As if there is no other boy in the village, that girl is after this bastard. He is bringing home too many problems at

this age and I'm not sure if he will let us live in peace when he grows big,' said my mother, pouring out her anguish.

'Since he is male, he needn't worry. But that girl should have some sense. It is said that a capable man may manage seven women. When people come to know that Eera Reddy's granddaughter has grown intimate with Madiga Ranganna's son, who will dare to question? Eera Reddy himself will come up to you and fall at your feet. Sinappa Reddy will wash Sunderraju's feet and get his daughter married to him. They will give half their property to you. If you become Eera Reddy's viyyankuralu [relation by marriage], surely you will enjoy the status of the reddemma of the entire village,' said the aunt from Belagalla, teasing my mother. The other women from our madiggeri, who were listening in, burst into laughter. I didn't dare to laugh because my hair was in my mother's hands. There I was, sitting with my head bent over while she scanned my hair for lice. So I became the target of her anger instead of the women who were actually making fun of her.

'Like a woman, you ask me to braid your hair, tie it with ribbons and put jasmines on it. But who is going to pick all the lice? Get married. Your wife will patiently pick the lice, comb your hair free of tangles, oil it, braid it and adorn it with flowers. From today onwards, don't sleep next to me at night. All your lice will get into my hair,' she screamed.

'Where should I sleep then?' I asked instantly.

'How dare you ask that? What you need is some pee in your mouth. Have you become such a big man that you dare ask me where you should sleep? You know, Eera Reddy has a three-storey building. On the ground floor, I've heard, Sinappa's daughter Sitrangi lies in the big cradle humming lullabies. Go and lie down beside her,' she concluded jerking me up and down with both hands by the fistfuls of hair she had readied for parting.

I screamed in pain and shouted abuses back at her. The madiggeri women stood there, laughing their guts out, as if they were watching a puppet show. Looking slyly at my mother, they said to me, 'Come boy, get up! Go, wash your face with soap, powder it and line your eyelids with kaajal. Then, with red kumkum on your forehead, you can walk to school through the bazaar like ganda jogamma.[1] Then your mother will worry that some evil eye may be cast on her cute son. She will make a fire and burn some red chillies to drive the curse away.' By then it seemed as though everyone in the madiggeri had heard about what was happening.

Now it's my mother's turn to retort. Aiming at Eswarakka's mother, she said, 'I understand the cause of your heartache. My son has left your daughter and paired up with Eera Reddy's granddaughter. That's why you are poking fun at us. But have no hopes that you will somehow entice him back into your daughter's hold. In any case,

like an expert seducer, he's been pairing up with good-looking women one after the other. Now, he has settled on Eera Reddy's granddaughter. That must make you worry about the future of your own daughter.' When you listen to the arguments and counter-arguments of these women in our madiggeri, you can't help wondering whether Indiramma, the tallest ruler this country has had, would not do better if she took a lesson or two from them.

The school has been decorated for this year's Independence Day celebration on 15 August. Strings of coloured paper and national flags deck the hall. The tricolour has been folded up with flowers inside and tied to the top of the flagpole, ready to be unfurled. The children stand in rows, one class to each row. The male teachers stand on one side. The only lady teacher stands alongside the children from the third class.

Boodalla teacher has become the headmaster! Close to the flagpole, a table and four chairs have been arranged. Everything is ready, but the flag hoisting is getting delayed. Since the children have been waiting for so long, they have started making some noise. Brandishing a stick, the karanam teacher shouts at them. They fall silent. My sister and I are standing a little apart from the other children so that we don't touch them. Everyone knows that we are madiga children and the others would be polluted if they touched us. That is why our teacher has made sure that we stood at a little distance from others. So what? Everyone knows that we come to school very clean—in fact, cleaner than the others—after thoroughly bathing, combing our hair, powdering our faces, and so on.

A car arrived with a loud burr. After it, a horse carriage. Sinappa Reddy, Umakka, her mother and Eera Reddy's two wives stepped out of the car. Eera Reddy alone emerged from the horse carriage. Our teachers all rushed out to greet the reddys. Holding the end of his dhoti with his right hand and twirling his moustache with the left, Eera Reddy walked up to the flagpole. The others followed. While the teachers and the rest of the reddy family watched, Eera Reddy tugged at the rope and unfurled the flag. The flowers fell to the ground. The folded-up tricolour opened like a little girl who has shed all her inhibitions. It flapped in the strong wind, making a 'tapa … tapaa' sound. Like a soldier on the run, but without proper direction, the flag looked as though it was trying to flee to some place. But since it was tied to a long rope, it could only flutter around the flagpole. It could not break free or move forward even a foot. It was in that state. Looking up at it, Eera Reddy raised his hand and shouted 'jai'. The children yelled 'jai jai' in chorus. The headmaster let them do that for a few seconds before saying, 'Enough, enough … silence.' Eera Reddy took three steps forward and stood facing the children. Behind him, on either side, stood the women of the Sinappa Reddy family. The headmaster looked at the fourth class children and called out to my sister, who was standing far behind other children, 'Eh! … Rani … come up here and sing the Gandhi song.'

Wonderful, he is wonderful, our Bapuji.
Grandfather to all children, Bapuji.
Toothless, sweet-smiling Bapuji,
defeated the white rulers,
gifted us independence,
preached against religious and caste differences
and declared, ‘one religion for all’.
Unity gives us strength!
Non-violence is the true weapon!

As my sister finished singing, everyone clapped. The teachers keep us at a distance because they are scared of the village people, but whenever there is a function such as this, they ask us to sing. If anyone asks why we are chosen for this, they tell them that in our village no one sings like the madiga children can.

When my sister was walking back after the song, Eera Reddy asked the headmaster who she was. The headmaster told him that she was Ranganna’s daughter. Then Eera Reddy said with appreciation: ‘So madiga Ranganna’s daughter sings so well!’

‘Reddy sir, there is one more song to be sung. This celebration will come to a close with the singing of that song. Then you can leave,’ said the headmaster, and he turned to our class and called out to me, ‘Oley … Sunderrajuga, start your tricolour song.’

I had been eagerly waiting for this ever since my sister had finished her song. I wanted others to appreciate the fact that I sang better and that too without any mistakes. But, now, suddenly, the headmaster has called me and my legs have begun to quiver. I’m wetting my shorts. I know that I have no option but sing, so I come up to the flagpole shivering, close my eyes and begin singing:

The tricolour flag, how beautiful it is
With the Ashoka wheel, it ascends in to the sky
The freedom flag, all-people’s flag …

I started off like this and went on to sing the whole song loud and clear, without making a single mistake. When I finished, I was gasping for breath.

Eera Reddy walked up to me, and tweaking my two plaits—one standing in the direction of the east and the other in the direction of the west and looking like rabbit

ears—he said, ‘Who is this little one?’ By then, since the song was over, the children and the teachers were clapping. The karanam teacher’s face turned angry as he had noticed that Eera Reddy had touched me. He rushed up to Eera Reddy and said, ‘reddy, reddy, that fellow is madiga Ranganna’s son, you have touched him!’

‘Oh … is that so? This fellow too is madiga Ranganna’s child! He sings well.’ Then, Eera Reddy turned to the teachers and impatiently said, ‘There are so many children in our village, and how is it that none of them can sing the national anthem? What a shame that our children can’t sing and we have to listen to these untouchable children sing. What have you teachers been doing? Why haven’t you taught these songs to our children?’ After that, he got someone to fetch water, washed the hands that had touched me, and wiped them with his dhoti.

While the other teachers were trying to pacify Eera Reddy, Salmon teacher tried to reason with him. ‘It is not like that, reddy. We teach the same things to all the children. Moreover, we make the madiga children sit apart from others. We should not be doing so since this is a government school. All the same, we follow the practices of this village. However, the madiga children are smarter than the village children and grasp things better. Same is the case with their voices. You yourself have witnessed it. They have sung so beautifully. It is really strange that no one in our village is able to sing like those madiga children. Tell me, what we can do about that, reddy?’ he asked.

Eera Reddy thought to himself, ‘All this looks like God’s play. I can’t believe that untouchable children can sing so well. That’s the reason perhaps why Rama had cut off Shambuka’s tongue for reciting the Vedas. But these days such things can’t be done. The government is pampering the untouchables too much. It’s our bad luck.’

And, looking at me, he said, ‘Ore, come here.’ I walked up to him, but being scared, I stopped a short distance away. Eera Reddy put his hand into his pocket. I was worried about what he would take out and what he would do to me. The teachers and the other reddy folk watched. Umakka was looking at me, holding Sinappa Reddy’s hand.

Eera Reddy took out a one-rupee note from his pocket. ‘You have sung very well. Buy something with this,’ saying this he got up from the chair and came up to me to hand over the note, but as he was about to give it to my hand, he dropped it on the ground. Perhaps, he suddenly remembered that he had touched me earlier while everyone watched. What would they think of him? He had already washed his hands once. He may not have wanted to repeat all that.

The note fell in front of my feet.

Eera Reddy walked up to the horse carriage and got in.

Looking at Boodalla teacher, Sinappa Reddy said, ‘Today is the last day my daughter will be at this school. We are taking her back to Bangalore with us.’ Then, he told

Umakka to distribute chocolates to the teachers and the children and walked up to the car and got in. Looking at me through the car window, Umakka waved to me with a chocolate in her right hand. The car started.

The karanam teacher was shouting to me, asking me to pick up the note. I bent down to pick it up, but it flew into the crowd of children. They began chasing Eera Reddy's one-rupee note, screaming 'catch it, catch it'.

The car that Umakka had got into moved off, leaving a cloud of dust. Umakka threw the chocolate out of the window and gestured to me to take it. Declaring that the school was over for today, the teachers began walking slowly towards their homes.

I walked up to the spot where Umakka had dropped the chocolate and started searching for it. I don't know where it had vanished.

It's becoming dark.

I haven't yet found the chocolate that Umakka had dropped for me.

With the hope that I'll find it, I'm still searching for it.

The lamps have been lit in the village.

Challapalli Swaroopa Rani

‘My mother has two names. Her name in the records is Nagamma, and she is called Mariyamma. My father also has two names: Mantraiah and Manikya Rao. My grandfather also had two names. It was common those days to have two names—it says something about the experience of conversion to Christianity. Mantraiah was the name of a village goddess that my family elders used to worship. My father was named after that goddess,’ Swaroopa Rani told us when we asked her about her parents.

Her father came from Chandolu, a village near Bapatla. The family lived in Pyaparru, her mother’s village. Swaroopa Rani was born in 1968, one of five children in the family; she is the fourth. Both her parents were agricultural workers who also owned a small piece of land. Her mother had studied up to class seven; her father did not have formal education, but was a fount of knowledge. He knew many songs and would recount stories about the area. He also had a keen awareness of political issues, was supportive of his children’s aspirations and interested in their work. ‘He gave us, all five of us, girls as well, freedom; he encouraged us,’ she says.

Until she passed the tenth class in 1984, Swaroopa Rani studied in her village. ‘My childhood was fairly typical for a rural uneducated dalit family. We dealt with untouchability and experienced the deprivations of class; my grandparents doted on my brother and pampered him. Although we were allowed into the classroom during school, evening tuitions were taken by a brahmin teacher who made us sit outside.’ She moved to Ponnur for her intermediate studies and then, in 1986, to Guntur Women’s College, where she studied for a BA in economics. She had an interest in history and archaeology from very early on. She completed her M.A. from Nagarjuna University.

Swaroopa Rani’s final year in school, 1985, was also the year of the Karamchedu massacre and the rise of dalit movement. Katti Padma Rao visited their village several times. ‘So many things changed with Karamchedu. We lost the feeling of inferiority, gained a determination to fight. When Chunduru [1991] happened, I was studying for my M.A.’ Her teachers generally encouraged her writing and she began contributing to magazines while still in college.

‘But only in Hyderabad Central University, which I joined in 1996 for my Ph.D, did I get the feel of a live literary atmosphere. In HCU at the time, dalit issues were on the boil. But when the dalit question was being raised with such force, the women’s question was missed. There were no women writers in that early and definitive

anthology, *Chikkanavuthunna Pata* [A Thickening Song, 1995]. The path-breaking feminist collection, *Neeli Meghalu* [Blue Clouds, 1993] features only one dalit woman. I found myself in that somewhat empty space. Yendluri Sudhakar and Satish Chandar had written important and good dalit poems. I was also inspired by the feminist writers Patibandla Rajani, Kondepudi Nirmala and others. But no one was talking about dalit women.

'It is possible that there was no patriarchy in very early times, but after Sanskritization, no pure dalit culture remains. What is more, today it is the Christian dalits who are most brahminized. Their women are restricted. My sense is that Christianity has damaged and suppressed the dalit consciousness. So the problem is worse when it comes to Christian women. Those with a Hindu background are stronger.

'I find that dalit groups do not pay serious attention to women's issues. Feminism (streevadam) has concentrated on gender. Many feminists do not even have class consciousness, let alone a caste one. Such feminism is of little use to dalits and can actually be brahminical. Feminist literature (streevada sahityam) coming from such groups has been a big success. Also there is a difference that is not always noted between dalit women's writing and dalit feminism. I am concerned with dalit feminism, in which issues of class, caste and gender come together. I have written an article titled "Annihilation of Caste and Feminism Are Interrelated", and another which argues that categorization of SC reservations is essential for dalit unity.'

Swaroopa Rani began with writing about her experiences: loss, grief, friendship and childhood attachments. She moved from the personal to the social and attained confidence and clarity. Her later, mature poetry consciously deals with issues of gender and caste. 'My poems come out of strong feelings, generally of sadness. Poetry helps me feel happy; it gives me mental stability. When personal experiences and feelings take on social meaning, the pleasure is great. My new poetry has given me a lot of confidence. Reading and writing is a way of life for me. I have also written a dozen or so short stories. Many of these are based on my father's life and his experiences. There is one about the friendship between a dalit family and a Muslim family.'

When a group of feminists started the forum Prajaswamika Rachayitrula Vedika (Democratic Women Writers' Forum) in 2009, Swaroopa Rani was asked to be its president.[1] Given the important questions of marginalization that were being raised by madigas and the Telangana issue, she refused, since she was a mala and from coastal Andhra. 'But I had to accept after a lot of persuasion. I agreed to be part of this initiative, as it was a forum of feminists known for their serious political views, but not totally mainstream. The forum began with the understanding that feminism cannot solve all problems and that it has limitations. I was involved with this understanding. But when criticism came, it was focused more on me than the others in the forum. Some

even alleged that I had sold out. This is a voluntary forum conducted with our own funds. What award will I get from it? I became a victim of politics in the literary field. I am not part of that forum any more,' Swaroopa Rani explained.

Swaroopa Rani published her first collection of poetry *Mankenapuvvu* (The Red Mankena Flower) in 2005. Her poems have been published in a number of Telugu magazines and in the literary sections of the main newspapers. They have also appeared in *Interior Decoration*, a collection of Indian women's poetry in translation. Her stories have been included in many anthologies. She has also been actively associated with the editorial part of several small journals and little magazines. She worked as editor of the dalit–bahujan journal, *Bahujanakeratalu*, for two years and was a member of the editorial board of another dalit journal *Samantara.* She has contributed essays on a broad range of issues to *Ekalavya* (a dalit journal), *Choopu* (a feminist journal), *Charcha* (a Marxist journal) and *Arunatara* (the CPI-ML journal*).* Her academic research is in the areas of Buddhism, social history and folklore. She is currently associate professor in the Centre for Buddhist Studies in Nagarjuna University, Guntur.

Water

Translated by Uma Bhrugubanda

Just as the water knows
the ground's incline,
it knows the generations-old strife
between the village and the wada.
Like the dampness on the well's edge that never dries,
It knows that untouchability never disappears.

The water knows everything.

It knows the difference of race
between the Samaria woman and Jesus the Jew.
It also knows the sub-caste difference
between leather and spool.

It knows the agony of the panchama,
who, not having the right to draw a pot of water,
waits all day near the well
with his empty pot
until a shudra arrives.

It knows the humiliation
of the wada girl
when he who poured the water from a distance,
falls all over and touches her.

It knows the righteous rage
of Karamchedu Suvarthamma[2]
who opposed the kamma landlords
with her water pot
when they asked her not to pollute the pond water.

The water is witness
to centuries of social injustice.

When I see water
I remember
how my wada which would thirst all day
for a glass of water.

For us, water is not simply H_2O,
for us, water is a mighty movement.
It is the Mahad struggle at the Chadar tank.
A single drop of water embodies
tears shed over several generations.

In the many battles we fought
for a single drop of water,

our blood flowed like streams.
But we never managed to win
even a small puddle of water.

When I see water,
I remember
how we welcomed our weekly bath
as if it was a wondrous festival!
While the entire village bathed luxuriously—
twice a day.

When I see water,
I remember
my childhood,
when we walked miles
to reach the big canal
and carried back heavy pots,
with the muscles and veins on our necks straining, bursting.

I remember,
its thatched roofs aflame,
the malapalle burning to ashes
for want of a pot of water.

Water is not a simple thing!
It can give life
but it can also devour lives.
The water that refused to quench parched throats
became the killer tsunami wave,
that swallowed whole
village after village.

The poor are but playthings

in its vicious hands.
Often, it turns villages into dry deserts
and sometimes it drowns them in floods.

Between the village and the wada
between one state and another,
this water can ignite many struggles and strife.
It can make blood run in streams.
but it can also sit innocently
in a Bisleri bottle.

This water from our village well
that forces us to do many a circus feat,
now slowly, surreptitiously,
dances its way into the Pepsi man's bottle.
With its new name 'mineral water'
it takes to the skies,
it raises a storm.

Now
water is no mean matter.
It's a multinational market commodity.

As they say
water is omniscient.
It contains the world.

Caste Domination Male Domination

Translated by Lisa Mitchell

On the occasion of the golden jubilee of India's Independence, various groups across the country are taking stock of whether, after fifty years, independence has actually reached their group, and are weighing up the successes and failures of their movements. On this occasion, women's organizations are also reviewing the status of women after Independence. In the first twenty-five years, women gained little from reforms and projects introduced by the government. However, in 1970, for the first time, the central government appointed a committee to conduct a survey on the status of Indian women. When presenting its report in 1974, the committee revealed that the economic and social condition of Indian women is quite pathetic. This caused some alarm both within the government and in the general population. With the announcement of the year 1975 as International Women's Year, the feminist movement received an impetus nationwide, and raised some very important questions on women's education, health and other issues. As a result, the government established family courts, separate cells for women in police stations and women's commissions. With the proclamation of International Children's Year [in 1979], the government also took some interest in women's health and education. In the 1980s, the feminist movement, which was gradually gaining strength, grew to the extent of fighting for reservations for women in the Legislative Assembly. Not only in these movements, but also in the literary sphere, women achieved comparable progress. Feminist literature has produced a situation in which it has become absolutely necessary for male writers to observe some caution while using language, especially in Telugu literature. To this extent, we should say that the feminist movement has achieved success.

However, has the feminist movement truly achieved success? The question before us today is: which class of women has gained the most from the government's welfare programmes and from the feminist movement. We will understand the limits of these initiatives if we ask ourselves which class of women and whose problems are principally represented by the feminist movements or literature. Feminists are fighting uncompromisingly against the many kinds of oppression that women face in a patriarchal family setup, and because of male egoism outside it. They are fighting against the many atrocities against women: killings, dowry deaths, physical and psychological violence against women, and other problems, as also the burden of almost single-handedly shouldering responsibilities like housework, cooking and raising children. However, it appears that there is no awareness in these movements about caste and class. For the feminist movement in India, all women are the same and, therefore, their problems are the same. But this is far from the reality. In our society, which has differences of caste, religion, class and region, the problems of any group are not the same as that of any other group. Although some similarities may exist, many differences are also evident. Because all these groups have their own identities, their problems will also be particular to their situation. Although the slogan 'All Women Are

One' appears very liberal, it does not allow the reflections of feminists to move even one step beyond that.

However evil the patriarchal system in this country is, the more barbarous system is caste. It is not necessary to lay out here the role that caste performs in our society. The problems of upper-caste women and those of dalit women are not the same in shape or in quality. If other women are the victims of gender-related oppression, dalit women are also the victims of caste and class exploitation. Compared with the oppressions of caste and poverty, which chase them at every step, their gender problems don't seem so immediate. It's not that dalit women don't face domestic violence and physical problems. Patriarchy, brahminism and the capitalist system are all their enemies. From the day of a dalit woman's birth, this system creates difficulties for her, piles her with humiliations under all conditions, without the least acknowledgement of her humanity. Dalit women are cruelly humiliated in public places and in buses as a matter of routine. Seeing their rustic appearance, lack of education, and poverty, everyone from the bus conductor onwards makes disparaging remarks and curses them. The harassment meted out to them in their places of work is beyond description. There is no limit to the atrocities committed by male employers on those who work in fields and in houses. It's not possible for them to speak out concerning their difficulties even when they are subjected to physical and mental torture. Those who resist such treatment will be accused of theft or other crimes and sent away. The most remarkable thing here is that the house owners' wives do not show the least sympathy for domestic workers as fellow women should; instead, they will proclaim that their husbands are above doubt and hurl abuse at the dalit women in order to defend their respectability.

The labour-class dalit women, who work day and night in fields, houses and factories receive only very meagre daily wages. Because there is a disparity in the rates for daily wage labour between female wages and male wages, the situation is that the money they are given is not even enough for food. If a woman's husband becomes a drunkard, and is not able to care for the children, her life and troubles are even more wretched. After everyone else eats, often there won't even be the burnt remains of food for her. Naturally, lack of nutritious food leads to many illnesses. Children born to them are also born with anaemia and weakness. Dalit women do not have access to even minimal medical facilities. If they go to primary health-care centres, there won't be any medicines available. It is, of course, beyond their economic means to go to private hospitals. There are women who have died during childbirth without the benefit of minimum medical attention.

The literacy levels among dalit women are very low. The parents, struggling as they are with poverty, think that school-going children will only be an expense, but if those children take up a small job, the family will receive some additional money. Girls are

more likely to drop out of school midway. They find the work of cleaning houses and caring for children of families that are better off. With this, any possibility of further education is extinguished. If a very few girls continue their studies with great difficulty, the eyes of every male teacher in schools and social welfare hostels are on these children. This essay does not have the space for a detailed narration of the crimes and atrocities committed against them. In employment too dalit women don't receive equal status and respect. Even employees who are lower in the work hierarchy than a dalit woman show her no respect because of her caste. In colleges and schools, the practice of deceiving young dalit women with promises of love and marriage has become very common. In Rayalaseema, northern Andhra, Karnataka, Maharashtra and other regions, dalit women are groomed in the name of god to become devadasis, joginis and basavis. The upper-caste landlords celebrate the dedication of dalit women to the temple as village festivals. The humiliation suffered by Sajjalagudem Mahadevamma, Chilakurthi Muttavva and other jogini women is the most degraded form of caste discrimination.[3] In addition, the succession of crimes performed by 'civilized' animals on tribal women is the height of barbarity. There are so many instances in which police and forest officials have subjected tribal women to torture under the pretext that these women support Naxalites. Dalit women do not face all these problems simply because they are women. Because of their caste, it is clearly understood that these types of exploitation and oppression can be carried out upon them with no hindrance. It is their caste that makes them vulnerable to this sort of exploitation and oppression. However, among dalit women, there is an increasing awareness that exploitation must be confronted, as also an impassioned spirit of mobilization. Among the women who risked their lives and fought in the great historical Telangana peasant struggle, the majority were dalit! Even though their sacrifices have not yet been illuminated, they will come to life when one digs deep into history. The feudal upper-caste landlords destroyed the dalit women who questioned the violent atrocities in Karamchedu. The anti-arrack movement led by dalit women startled the country. Similarly, the land struggle that dalit women carried out in Madduru in Kurnool district was successful. In many more movements, dalit women have withstood many hardships and fought without concern for their lives. They have endured everything from lathi blows at the hands of the police to atrocities so that they may travel the path of struggle. Yet despite this, and despite their significant presence, they did not get the status or recognition of being leaders. The practice of reciting feminist doctrines is also not familiar to dalit women. They know only about fighting on their own for their self-respect.

These days, the number of educated among dalit women is growing. They are making their voice heard in literature as well. Dalit women were represented at the Beijing conference that was organized in 1995, where they worked to highlight their position on a global platform. Dalit women now identify with women of the black community, with

whom they share a similarity of issues. The strength and fighting spirit of black women is a model for dalit women.

When we look at every action of upper-caste women and every action of dalit men regarding dalit women, a very remarkable trend is revealed. In addition to wanting to lead the movements that have been built and led by dalit women themselves, upper-caste feminists skip over the particular problems of dalit women with very broad slogans like 'All women are one'. In whichever women's association office you look, pictures of dalit labourers will be the first you see! The problems of dalit women will not figure in the intellectual discussions in these associations. Dalit women will not be visible in the offices or even in the entire elite locality where these offices are set up. The environment is such that it is almost impossible for a dalit woman to sit there or have a conversation. With regard to the reservation bill, for which feminist groups are fighting, their thought appears to be that there should be no caste reservations within women's reservations! That is to say, in their view, the social, economic and societal status of all women are the same, and therefore caste reservations are not necessary. This instance clearly illustrates the limits of our feminist movements.

Similarly, in another direction, dalit male intellectuals and poets say that, for their women, the labour room is not a problem like it is for upper-caste women.[4] Similarly, they say that in dalit culture there is democratic patriarchy and no violence, as there is among the upper castes. It seems, alas, that they do not know how many dalit women die in childbirth without the benefit of even minimal health facilities. If we come now to the issue of patriarchy, as the proverb goes, 'the size of the tree determines the force of the wind', meaning that a man will oppress those who depend upon him to the extent that his power allows. As a dalit man doesn't have in his hands the same facilities that an upper-caste landlord does, he carries out the oppression within his own limits. But it is not true that democracy is present in that patriarchal system.

Thus, when on the one hand, upper-caste women are passing resolutions proclaiming that we are all women, on the other hand, dalit men make statements on behalf of dalit women declaring that we all are dalits. A dalit woman today suffers alone in a confused state, not knowing whether to join with other women just because she was born a woman, even though other women don't see her point of view at all, or to join with dalit men just because they are fellow caste members, even though they force her to keep her mouth shut.

However fraught with danger patriarchy is for a dalit woman, brahminism is the more wicked enemy. Asking which is more distressing is like asking whether it will be more painful to set yourself on fire with petrol or with kerosene! While dalits are fighting against casteism, it's also necessary to fight the war against patriarchal ideology. The majority of dalit women don't even have the awareness to understand the

nature of the exploitation they suffer from. This is why the struggle of dalit women has not gone as far it should have by now. As the number of educated people grows among dalit women, the movement's vitality may also gradually grow through them.

Gogu Shyamala

Gogu Shyamala was born in 1969 in Peddemul village in Ranga Reddy district. Her parents are agricultural workers. Her great-great-grandmother had received an acre of manyam land. Such dry lands, granted by the Hyderabad Nizams to dalits for services rendered, was jointly held by others in the community and cultivated by turn, each family getting cultivation rights for three years. She was also the leader of a vetti (unpaid labour) team that worked for the local landlord. But for ten to fifteen days in a month, she and her family cultivated their manyam land.

Shyamala says that her father, G. Balappa 'loved agriculture'. He inherited the manyam rights and, helped by her mother Ananthamma, managed to put aside enough to buy eight more acres. However, being illiterate, he had difficulty maintaining accounts, keeping track of wages paid out to their hired labour or loans taken and repaid. That was one of the reasons why he sent his daughter to school. When literacy classes started up in his area, he was among the first to enrol. He also took part in the village katha performances and could play every instrument in the band.

'My father had me and my schooling on his mind every hour of the day. Before my brother and I joined the local primary school, he went around persuading his friends to send their children also [so that his children would not be lonely]. He even bought Colgate tooth powder for me, and clothes of the same colour as the dora's daughter.' Four boys joined along with them and, a month later, another girl. Shyamala was the first girl to study in school. From Class 5 to Class 10 she was sent off to Tandur to study. Before she went, he searched the whole area to find the best social welfare hostel for her. After she finished school and joined intermediate, the problems began. She was not entitled to stay at her old hostel any longer. They found a room, but she had to cook —even the firewood was brought from home; she had to manage with one change of clothes. 'Seeing what trouble it was causing my father, I began to dislike my education. I had joined the BiPC stream [he hoped she would do medicine] and needed record books, dissection books, instruments. I just did not want to trouble my father and quietly changed to the commerce stream. I had no interest in those subjects.'

The story of Shyamala's higher education is not unlike that of many other bright students like her in the 1970s and '80s. The CPI-ML students organization, PDSU, was active in her district. 'They took note of me and encouraged me, and took me with them for their summer village camps. In 1985, I helped canvass for PDSU in the college

elections and they were successful. I left college. Politics was demanding and I liked the challenge—though I was at the same time unhappy about leaving my studies. I moved to Hyderabad—joined the social welfare hostel at Bolakpura and enrolled for a lab technician's course. Study became nominal, politics dominant.'

Her new life made her father very anxious. He felt he had lost her. Both parents were old and the family needed support. Shyamala was very disturbed by all this. She applied for a nurse's job. 'They asked for 10,000 rupees. Where was I to find that?' She returned to her district and got involved in the land and other struggles organized by the Rytu Coolie Sangham (Organization of Agricultural Labourers). The women in the area collected madugu gaddi, an oil-producing plant that was used to make perfume. PDSU sent Shyamala to organize the Sangham. She worked for three to four days before the women precipitated their demands. The strike was a success: they got an increase of Rs 3 for 100 bundles. 'I really felt important and valued; there was the regard from the people; there was satisfaction in doing work that was meaningful to my people. I forgot my family and immersed myself in the work. I wrote songs, pamphlets, press releases. This was the beginning of my life in writing.' Vijay, whom she would later marry, led the land struggles. When she wrote, she first showed it to him. He checked to see whether it was okay and published it.

During this period, she attended classes in Warangal. She was declared a full-timer of the CPI-ML. She joined a squad. They had uniforms, lived out in the open. She was part of a campaign around the 1/70 Act relating to the protection of tribal land. 'I really enjoyed it—the food, the atmosphere, the life—and wanted to stay back. But the party got anxious about the work in my district and encouraged me to return. There was also the suggestion that I marry Vijay. I did not want to get married at the time, but there were many comrades pestering me and I decided it was best to go with one person. I married Vijay in 1990. Besides, he was a hard-working man and very committed to the organization. We did not tell my family. I belong to the madiga caste. He belonged to the baindla caste, had no job and no education to speak of; besides he was underground at the time. The police got after my father. "Why did you give your daughter to a Naxalite?" they asked. At some point it got so bad that he regretted ever having educated me. It was a tough time. But I knew that what I was getting was the best education; that this was the best career I could have. I was fully committed to the organization and to the people.'

After Shyamala got married, a slew of new troubles began. She got pregnant. She was asked [by her organization] to get an abortion, which she did. She went home to rest and got arrested under TADA though she was carrying no weapons and was only involved in land struggles. That was around 1991. She spent some months in jail. Around the time she was released, the Progressive Organization of Women (Stree

Vimukti) was formed in 1991. She was made its convenor for Hyderabad city. Then she became pregnant again. It was expected that she would have another abortion. She did not want that but she had to hide the pregnancy to protect her husband who was underground. She wore loose pyjama-kurtas until she was really big. After that she went underground. Her son was born in 1993. She generally used to carry her child around with her as she worked; there was a beedi worker with whom she could leave him sometimes in the mornings. Since she had chosen to have him, she had to look after him and do the organizational work at the same time—and that she did, without complaint. During this period, she was known by many names, Sujata, Chandrakala, Uma, and there were cases booked against her. Shyamala also worked on dowry deaths. In 1994, she attended the Fifth National Conference of Women's Movements in Tirupati.

The early 1990s was a critical period. The massacre of dalits in Chunduru took place in 1991. CPI-ML Janasakthi was formed in 1992, a coalition of seven communist parties. A polarization began to emerge in the Janasakthi party between the dalits and the non-dalits over the way the caste question was understood. A second-generation leadership had come into place and once again they were mostly kamma in the coastal areas, and in Telangana, reddy, OBC or brahmin. 'I began reading Ambedkar and many other books. DAFODAM [Democratic Action Forum for Dalits and Minorities] was formed in 1998. I was the co-convenor of this organization.

'I began to feel that the respect that I had in the ML movement was getting eroded; that our raising of the caste issue was not appreciated. I began feeling alienated, undervalued. I was being given less work, trusted less. I pulled out and stayed at home. My mother had passed away and my father could not work any longer; I wanted to look after him. I wanted to take care of my son. I registered for a course. I read a lot. I read Ambedkar for the first time. Earlier, I would have been chided [by the seniors in the party] if I were found reading his works. I also read Chalam's *Biddala Sikshana* [Educating Children] and Stree Shakti Sanghatana's *Manaku Teliyani Mana Charitra* [published in English as *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle*, 1991] and other books. I began writing about the women cadre in the ML movement. It became a big document. I wrote about abortions, the problems of raising children, and the difficulties dalit and BC women faced. [Upper-caste women usually had family members who were at home and with whom they could leave their children without fear of inviting repression. I wrote about health and especially about gynaecological problems and depression among the women. The document created quite a stir.

'I had this hunger to read. I carried books around with me all the time. When I was made city convenor, I started putting together a library in the office. In general, the attitude was that reading and writing were only for some people. We [dalits] were

supposed to sing, not speak or write. My hunger to read just grew and grew. So when I was asked whether I would like to do some research on dalit women, I readily agreed. I wanted to read.

'It was a totally new experience, having the space and time to read and I made the most of it. Jaya, who was coordinating the Telugu programmes at Anveshi, encouraged me. This was also the time when the idea of dalit literature was beginning to take shape in Telugu. *Chikkanavuthunna Pata* (A Thickening Song) had appeared in 1995, *Bahuvachanam* (The Prose of Plurality) in 1996. Lakshmi Narasaiah, Madduri Nagesh Babu, Nagappagari Sunderraju, Pydi Theresh Babu, Kalekuri Prasad were all publishing new writing. So when I began working on a collection of dalit women's writing, I did so with confidence. I began by reading *Savalaksha Sandehalu* [A Thousand Doubts: Women's Health, Culture and Politics, 1991], and parts of *Women Writing in India* in the Telugu translation that was being prepared. I searched out and read every bit of writing by dalit women that I could find and then interviewed them. It was amazing. Many, many new issues emerged. I really enjoyed myself. It was like the tension of harvest was for my father. I too wanted to bring in the harvest safely.

'I began understanding why it was so important to write *Nallapoddu* [Black Dawn]. The book was a landmark. After the book was published, the dalit women writers in it began thinking of themselves as writers. Many of them had been writing regularly, but had never seen their work in print. I myself wrote my first story for *Nallapoddu*. As I read all the material, I felt I could also write and I wrote a story. In fact, I just told it and Srilakshmi typed it for me. Then I gave it to Bhagya. "Such a nice story," she said. Then I showed it to K. Lalita. "Wonderful story!" she said. I began to feel I could be a writer. That was in 2002. I sent the story to the feminist journal, *Bhumika*. The critic Gorusu Jagadishwar Reddy wrote back appreciating it; Sajaya wrote a review, using it as a base for discussing dalit patriarchy. I was astonished. I had written about my father. What I was describing was a complex thing. Patriarchy was just too thin a concept for it. B.S. Ramulu wrote: "Life is more amazing than a story." But there were criticisms too. Some people did not like my use of the language that we spoke in our area. *Andhra Bhoomi* refused to publish my story "Eellamma Dasikindi" [Ellamma is Distressed]. I had drawn on Professor Muthyam's book on Yellamma to write that story. "Tataki" was based on my sister. She works the land, sits on the panchayat, and treats people with herbs and local medicines. I thought a lot about the ending of that story. In a sense, it is a story about an atrocity, about molestation. But its freshness lies in the focus on how the community manages; the strategies they devise to cope with these problems and continue life. There are so many dimensions to dalit life and I want to understand them.'

Asmita Resource Centre for Women's Studies awarded 'Radam' (Raw Wound) their literary prize in 2002. 'With that I was recognized as a writer. *Nallapoddu* had

established me as an intellectual.' Earlier I used to speak in the villages with confidence; not so in the city. But after this, I began to speak without fear. I saw that even the leading lights often spoke badly, without really thinking.'

Shyamala is involved in the Madiga Dandora movement and has been active in the struggle for a separate statehood for Telangana. Her recent book, *Nene Balanni: T.N. Sadalakshmi Bathuku Katha* (I am the Strength: The Life Story of T.N. Sadalakshmi, 2011), is a biography of T.N. Sadalakshmi, a dalit, madiga, woman political leader and minister in several Congress governments in Andhra Pradesh. Shyamala's first collection of stories, translated into English as *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But …* (2012), is a fresh take on Telangana, on madiga life and on contemporary India.

She is currently a senior fellow at Anveshi Research Centre for Women, Hyderabad.

Raw Wound

Translated by R. Srivatsan

Father was at work in the ploughed field, levelling the ridges and removing weeds from the red soil. At home, Mother searched anxiously for someone who could carry his lunch bundle to him. She was in a hurry to leave for her work site, and told her friend, Nagamma, 'Let me know if anyone is going towards the red hillock where my husband is, I need to send him his meal.'

A moment later, Nagamma shouted to my mother from behind the house, 'My child, Ananthamma, no one I know is going in that direction. It is time, and the men will be looking homeward for their food. Take care of this matter and then start for work as soon as you can.'

Not knowing what to do, Mother thought of abandoning her day's work but hesitated, muttering: 'For the last four days, fifteen of us have bent down and planted paddy, not having stood straight for a moment. I'll get my wage of forty rupees today. But I'll lose the money if I don't go.' She tied the bundle of rotte and lentils silently, and filled the aluminium pot with buttermilk. She put a small bit of charcoal in the white buttermilk to protect it from the evil gaze, and wondered who could carry it to Appa.

'I'll take it, you go on to work,' I blurted, without even thinking. Mother's face was worth seeing—it shone with the brightness of five moons!

‘Will you, my dear?’ she exclaimed. She rushed into the kitchen, bringing a bit of soot and marked my foot, palm and temple to protect me from the demons on the way. ‘Be careful now. Walk on the side of the path, looking ahead—don’t stumble on the stones. If any old men joke with you and ask you to look here or there, don’t!’ she said.

I put the rotte bundle on my head and started walking. ‘My father will be very pleased. He’ll praise me,’ I thought and wanting to meet him quickly, hastened along. As I crossed the road and entered the path between the fields, grandpa Talaari Samuel saw me. He was surprised. ‘What, my granddaughter! You are now old enough to carry food to your father, are you? Go carefully, little one,’ he said.

‘Okay, Grandpa,’ I replied. After going some distance, I placed the buttermilk pot and the lunch bundle down on a black rock, turned my stiff neck this way and that, shook my numb arms and clenched my aching fists. I took a sip from the buttermilk and wiped my mouth. Putting the bundle back on my head, I picked up the pot and began walking again.

Uncle Anthaiah, bringing his cattle back from the grazing grounds, said to me, ‘It’s you, my niece, carrying your father’s lunch! Look, an eagle is carrying a chicken up into the clouds—look up!’

‘Uncle! I’ll throw you over my shoulder,’ I retorted half-angrily. He was bluffing, and my mother had warned me about this. I didn’t look up and hurried on. It was time to eat. Appa would be hungry and looking towards the house. I walked faster. I finally reached the field. Appa had not yet stopped levelling—he kept working. He saw me and leapt on to the boundary and walked up to me. He took the bundle and the pot of buttermilk and put it down.

‘My dear, you have brought the food at the right time, just when I am hungry,’ he said happily. He then growled, ‘Why have you brought the food? Your mother should have done this.’

‘Mother would have come, but today is the last day of her labour contract and they will pay her wages. I heard this and offered to bring the food. I also wanted to see the fields,’ I replied.

He beamed at me. ‘My dear, you have a big mind and a large, courageous heart—just like my mother did.’ Both of us sat down to the meal. When we finished, Appa said, ‘Sit under the tree, my child,’ and got back to work.

It was winter when the sun sets in the evening like a diving bird. Appa hurried up, wanting to finish this plot to the boundary so that he could start the next field tomorrow. I couldn’t see him at work now. Just then, he called. ‘Syamamma, come here!’ I ran to him, hoping to see him work from up close. ‘The levelling plank is not sinking into the

earth properly—the weighing stone on it is not heavy enough. Be a good girl and sit on the plank,' he said.

I agreed happily, pulled my skirt up between my legs, cross-tied my braids and sat on the levelling plank. Up close, I could see the plank digging into the ridges between the furrows clearly, as my weight pushed it down. It lifted the soft moist mud underneath, which frothed over with its sweet scent. I saw without sadness the weeds being pulled out with their roots. 'It is, after all, to plant crop that the weeds are removed,' I thought.

Just then, my father said, 'Don't look down, you'll get mud in your eyes!' My thoughts interrupted, I raised my eyes and looked ahead. In a while, the hard soil ended and the soft earth began. 'Weight is not needed any more. Go sit under the morinda tree,' my father said. I did as told.

The breeze wafted lovely smells from different sides. From the field to the left, the mature tuvar branches, deep green and filled with flowers, delivered their fresh aroma. From the right, the growing jowar field, with its lush leaves rustling in the wind, sent its new green scent. I walked amid the jowar plants. The leaves, running sap, beckoned and I looked. It was different in each place: on some leaves, sweet sugar-like crystals, on others, glistening in the sun like diamonds … I began tasting—eating the crystals and licking the sap off the leaf. I went through the rows tasting different leaves. While at it, I forgot the time and the sun had descended overhead. 'Syamammo!' my father called out.

I leapt out of the field and stood on the boundary. 'What is it, Appa? I'm here,' I said.

'What are you doing, ra? Are you licking the jowar sap? Don't! It'll cut your tongue, you won't be able to eat rotte! Chilli will burn—be careful,' he said.

'I know, but it is very tasty. I can't let go,' I thought.

'I'll continue planking till it gets dark. Go home while it is light, daughter,' he said. He tied the lunch vessels into a bundle, placed it on my head and gave me instructions to reach home safely. The path was filled with cowherds and I walked with them all the way home. Mother's contract labour was over and she came out to meet me.

She took the empty bundle off my head and asked how I fared. 'Did your father scold me for sending you?' she asked.

'No, Mother, I told him that it was your last day at the contract. He didn't say anything.'

'My daughter has my mother's qualities,' she exclaimed, caressing my cheeks with both hands and then pressing her folded knuckles against her temples. Hearing the loud and ready cracking, she said happily, 'My daughter always thinks about me.'

Weary, I fell asleep early. I don't even remember my mother waking and feeding me.

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The cock had not yet crowed when my mother woke me up. I got up sleepily. She took me out and gave me some charcoal for my teeth. ‘Brush your teeth quickly and I’ll braid your hair.’

I wondered why—I couldn’t understand anything. ‘Why did you wake me up now?’ I grumbled.

‘Don’t speak loudly.’ Hearing my mother speak like that, I felt nervous and my sleep evaporated. As I quickly finished brushing my teeth and came into the house, I found that my father was up already. He was arranging some papers and clothes in the suitcase. I watched him and silently went to my mother at the stove.

‘Have you finished, my dear?’ she said, pushing the firewood into the stove. ‘Unbraid your plaits,’ she said.

I questioned her with my eyes: ‘Why this hurry?’ She pacified me with a nod. I nodded back in assent.

After she had tied the rotte bundle, she began combing my hair. ‘Such thick and long hair! How will this little girl comb it herself every day?’ she muttered, and then, turning to me, she said, ‘Don’t fight with the other girls. Be friendly with everybody. Do each other’s braids.’

I then understood that I was going to the hostel at Tandur. ‘I am supposed to go in two months, aren’t I? Why the hurry?’ I asked.

At that moment, my grandmother Sangavva woke up and spoke almost in her sleep. ‘The plague be on them! May they die and their waist-cord be thrown into the tree! May their eating and shitting be stopped!’ she cursed. ‘They have been keeping an eye on us. It seems someone in the past laid a rule for our family. And we have to follow it—like a rule of god. Curse that god! Does he not have children? A lineage? What sin have we committed? They have come like Yama himself to spoil our child’s life.’ She began weeping inconsolably.

My mother leapt to Sangavva’s side, held her shoulders and said to her, ‘This is no time to cry aloud. If you do, it will be heard and the news will find its way to the landlords. If they come to know, father and daughter will not leave the village today. Don’t cry, my dearest mother-in-law. Keep your mind strong.’

‘Why do you cry, Mother? Our god is with us and we’ll go as far as we can with our strength. I’ll never put my child in bondage and grief!’ Appa said to Sangavva.

She raised her head and looked at us. Her eyes were glowing red, and wiping them, she said, ‘Yes, my son. You have expressed what I feel in my belly. Such an act cannot be committed in this family. My mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother—

nobody could point a finger at them! However much the landlords insist, don't agree to this. In the end, even if they put a sword to your neck, stay true to your word. Keep the family's honour up, my son.'

What was all this commotion about? I didn't feel like asking them at that moment. 'I'll come to know by and by,' I thought. But my mind didn't stop wondering. I kept listening to their words. The village seemed to be thinking about me. It was clear that the matter at hand was as prickly as a thorn bush! That was why my family was so concerned. This much I understood.

Then Mother said, 'If we sit talking about this, it will be dawn and you won't be able to leave. Go quickly!'

Appa wore his freshly washed dhoti and shirt, tied the striped towel to his head, and put the black shawl on his shoulder. He picked up the suitcase in one hand, his wire-wound staff in the other. He touched his mother Sangavva's feet. He told me to do the same. I fell at her feet too.

'Go safely, my children. May your task be successful,' she blessed us.

My mother woke my brothers up. 'Wake up, my sons. Your sister is going to the hostel. Send her off,' she said and had them touch my feet. 'Be careful,' she said to us.

Without speech or sound, we left the village. It was not yet dawn—an hour to go. The morning star hadn't yet appeared. The Three Plough Spikes constellation was high in the sky. The moon shone bright on the path. My father walked ahead, and I followed. No, my father strode ahead and I ran to keep up with him. The path was wet and marshy. The frogs in the paddy field croaked loudly and, as we passed, they leapt back into the water with a series of plops. The snakes on the plot boundaries slithered into the fields. We had to cross the village border by dawn. We had to go beyond the Mampuru lotus lake to a bus stop a mile ahead—only then would we find a bus to Tandur. My father leapt across the field canals on the way and helped me across holding my hand, saying, 'Be careful.' We reached the road just as the bus came.

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In the morning, all the girls stood in a queue with their plates in hand. My father asked them and found out that it would be some time before the warden arrived. We sat under the neem tree and ate our packed food. As we finished, the warden arrived. My father went to her, knelt and touched her feet with his hands and forehead.

'Oh my good fellow, why are you doing this? Tell me, what has happened?'

'Amma, you are my daughter's mother and father too! Now you alone must take care of her. We gave her birth, but we cannot confront her fate. If you show no mercy now,

my daughter's life will remain a raw wound. Everything is in your hands. We've been told that it will take two months for her name to come from the head office for admission. We don't have the freedom to wait these two months for the orders to come. We have been waiting so far, but the upper-caste patels of the village have made a sinful decision that my daughter should become a jogini.'

'A jogini?' the warden asked.

'A jogini is a girl from my community, the madiga community, dedicated to god.'

'I know what a jogini is,' interrupted the warden, but Appa continued, 'The patel will take her as his woman in the name of god, with the approval of all the upper castes and the priest in the village. She will then be available to every man in the village in god's name! I brought her here without the knowledge of the elders as soon as I heard of the decision. They had heard that I was going to put this girl in the hostel for her studies. They summoned me.'

My father went on to narrate every detail of what had happened. '"Balappa, you son of a bitch! Sending your daughter to study, are you? Don't you know the ways of the village, you bastard? If blight descends upon the village what will we do? How dare you stop a tradition that we have upheld in this village for so long, you ignorant fool?" the landlord said.

'To which I replied, "Oh Patela, what do you not know? If my only child becomes a jogini, how can she live? All the mala and madiga children in the surrounding villages are being sent to school. I have left both my sons to bondage. I would like to send at least this child to school."

'The dora's eyes went red with rage, and he said, "Have we spoken to you gently only to hear all your lame excuses? First tell me, are you going to make this girl a jogini or not? In this village, our word is law. We speak for the good of the village. Tomorrow, we may have deaths, disease, drought or famine. To try and appease the gods after that happens would be futile. We should do our dharma—only then will god look after us. Goddess Ooradamma's festival is coming up—who will mount the stage? Who will set up the swing at Goddess's Polepalli's fair? Our village's jogini, Lasmi, has become old and barren. She can no longer recite the required verses on the stage. The last time there was an epidemic of smallpox in the village, we wanted to sacrifice a buffalo, hang a strip of its flesh from her mouth and take her on the customary circuit of the village. She tried but her legs buckled and she fainted on the boundary wall of the paddy fields. To go on the stage at Ooradamma's festival, she was to fast from the previous day. She was supposed to climb on the pot as the oracle and foretell the fortunes of the village. She failed. She couldn't climb Polepalli's swing either. Even younger women can't climb the swing, how can that old hag? All this will not do. We have to dedicate another girl to the jogu. This should be done under the mentorship of

the old jogini while she is alive, the sooner the better. We have the responsibility to ensure that an ill wind does not blow across the village. All of us have to look to this. How could you send your daughter to study without seeing to this need? If you don't do your duty and I mine, we are doomed. We have to follow what is written on our foreheads. Who are we to change our destiny? You know that the fingers of the hand are not equal, don't you, my man?"

'This is what he said, Amma,' said my father to the warden. 'We have brought up these children skipping a meal every day. We are sending them to study so that they will not be bound to our slavery. How can I give my daughter as a jogini after having watched her grow under my own eyes? My stomach burns. I feel more dead than alive.' At this, Appa choked in grief and, speechless, he began sobbing out aloud. This was the first time I had seen my father weep uncontrollably and I felt the village's lake flooding with sorrow. I held fast to my father and could not help but cry myself.

Appa wept, I wept, and the warden's eyes filled with tears.

She wiped her eyes and said, 'The girl is getting frightened—don't weep, Balappa. What you are trying to do is very good. Stick to your decision.'

My father replied, 'Whatever happens to her life later, take her into the hostel now, my mother,' and fell at her feet again.

The warden said, 'The government banned the jogini system ages ago. Don't the landlords know this? Why are they continuing with this foolish practice? All right, Balappa, I'll take this girl into the hostel and send her to school. Go back and be at peace. Should the landlord tell you to bring your daughter back and offer her as a jogini, you come straight here! We'll file a police complaint against him,' advised the warden sternly.

'All right, my mother. I'll repay your favour by working for you. I'll plough your land if you need me to. As of now, I'll bring you two bundles of hay for your milch buffaloes,' said Appa.

She replied, 'All right, bring the hay for now.' My father bent over fully once again and touched her feet before he came out. I followed him. The warden returned to her work. Appa put his hand on my head, 'Your luck is good, my child. Study well and be careful. I'll return now, I've to get back under the eyes of the landlords.' He put his shawl on his shoulder, tied his turban and strode away rapidly. I stood there and watched him.

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Three girls, who were clearly looking for an opportunity to speak to me, came to my side and greeted me. They became my friends. The day passed quickly in study and

play, but at night I remembered my mother and brothers; Appa too came to mind. I was not used to sleeping alone.

At home, I used to snuggle against my mother's warm body. If I had to go to the bathroom, my mother would wake up. When we went to bed, my grandmother Sangavva and her mother Lasumavva would regale us with stories. When we slept in the yard, we would count the stars in the sky and tell each other stories about the constellations—the Three Plough Spikes, the Golden Bed, the Hen and the Chickens, the Scorpion.

In the hostel, we told each other whatever stories we knew after dinner. I would tell the girls all the stories my mother and grandmothers told me. After that, we studied for a while, and then spread our mattresses and lay down in a row. When the watchman came and said, 'Now go to bed, all of you,' I would cover myself fully with my sheet, but wouldn't be able to sleep. I remembered events at home with a shudder and my stomach sank in anxiety. I wondered what had happened to my father, what the landlords had said to him, whether they had abused him or beaten him up and how they might have made him suffer. I thought about how much my mother and Sangavva must have cried, and wept myself. I never knew exactly when I cried myself to sleep. I had nightmares and would wake up suddenly, sitting bolt upright. I missed my family deeply and wanted to go back to see them.

In the morning, the mess cook would ask, 'What is it, my dear? Your face is swollen, your eyes are red—are you ill?' I would not reply. Not knowing what to say, I would shake my head and my desire to weep would increase. But I couldn't cry, because I was afraid they would say I wanted to go home and send me back. So I swallowed my tears. One day when the cook saw me all pensive like that, she inquired, 'Remembering your mother and father, are you? In a few days, we'll be having a four-day holiday. Everyone will go home and come back. Why are you so sad? You should go too.' I cheered up.

On the day I had to go home, I removed my ribbons, lightly combed the hair plaited the day before and tied it up in a loop. I quickly washed, ate my breakfast and went to school with the other girls. When the evening bell rang, I put the money my brother had given me from his winnings at the game of marbles into my skirt pocket. I put the new books that I had been given in the hostel into my bag so that I could show them to my father. I slung the bag across my shoulder and started for home.

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It was spring and the jowar plants were pregnant with seed. Sparrows swooped, circled and dived among the plants, waiting to eat grain as they burst out of the ears. Unlike these impatient sparrows, the wise crows, as if knowing that the time was not yet ripe, flew confidently across the fields in groups. The trial begins when the ears pop and the

grain comes out. This is when a guard platform must be put up in the middle of the field. This is because the field is just by the road, and is overrun with melon creepers. When the cowherds come, their cows will run into the field and crush the jowar plants. Passers-by will pluck the raw ears of jowar to roast as a tasty snack. That is why one person must remain on watch day and night in this crucial period. Now, Sangavva has a two-month job at the field. She must be there twenty-four hours a day. Someone will have to bring her meals each day from the house.

The sun was rising and Sangamma told her son, 'Balappa, arrange for poles for the platform during the day,' as she picked up the broom, ready to go and gather the remaining grain from the threshing grounds in different fields. 'All right. We have the poles, but I need to locate sticks for the platform. I'll cut a few branches from the acacia trees lining our fields, okay?' said Balappa, shouldering his axe. He picked up his rotte bundle and set out. He hadn't crossed the village boundary when the landlord's bonded labourer came up and stood in his way. Balappa maintained an outward calm, but inside he was trembling as he tried to walk by. The boy, giving him due respect, said, 'Uncle, the landlord is calling for you.' Balappa's heart froze, because he knew immediately that he was being called because of Syamamma.

'How long can we hide a secret in a village? It will come out one day. What shall I do? What will be, will be. I sent her to the hostel fully knowing the risk, didn't I?' Balappa muttered to himself, his thoughts in a whirl. 'What for, my son?' he asked.

Downcast, the boy replied, 'About Syamamma's going to school, what else?' As if done with his duty, the errand boy left in a hurry.

Balappa was at a loss. He turned around and walked back into the village. As he crossed his neighbour Talaari Pentappa, he said, 'The landlord has called me. Tell your sister and my mother, brother-in-law,' he said and walked towards the landlord's house.

Passers-by who already knew the bad news looked anxiously at Balappa as they crossed him. 'Only God will protect me,' thought Balappa, looking up to the sky, pressing his hands together and raising them in prayer. He appealed to the passers-by with fear in his eyes. He crossed the madiga quarter, then the mala colony, the telaga bazaar and went to the landlord's house at the centre of the village. Balappa had thought that the landlord would be alone, but he saw him from afar, sitting with the sub-inspector of police, the ex-sarpanch Chandra Reddy, the moneylender Badrappa Setu, the village revenue accountant Karnam Srirama Sharma Pantulu. The landlord's name was Anantha Reddy and he was the sarpanch of the village. The watchman stopped Balappa at the gate.

'Wait, Balappa, the elders are in a meeting,' he said.

‘My man, the patel called for me. He should know that I came as soon as he called. Let him see me once and I’ll wait as long as necessary,’ pleaded Balappa.

‘You sit down. I will tell him. They’ll get angry if you interrupt them,’ the watchman replied.

Balappa sat at one side. In two hours, some of the people from the meeting walked away. Only the landlord Anantha Reddy and Srirama Sharma remained. They left the meeting room and came out to sit on the platform where they met the people of the village. The watchman came out and said, ‘Balappa, the patel is calling for you. Come.’

Balappa stood immediately, took off his turban and held it in his hand, left his slippers outside the door and walked in, saying, ‘Salute, Patela!’

Anantha Reddy and Srirama Sharma talked among themselves, paying him no heed. Balappa folded his arms across his chest in submissive obedience and stood there, eyes cast downwards. The landlord looked him up and down and asked, ‘Where did you go off to, Baliga?’

‘Where did I go, my lord? The jowar field is ripe for the sparrows and I was going to cut down some acacia branches for the watch platform,’ said Balappa.

‘You are getting too clever, you rascal. This is not about today. Where have you taken your daughter?’ the landlord asked, raising his voice.

Even as Balappa tried to continue, ‘Patela, my daughter …’

‘You have learned to reply to each word, have you, you son of a bitch? What do you think of yourself? Do you not want to live in this village? Even though we have spoken as gently to you as to a parrot, you have sent her to study! The moment you sent your daughter to study, you disobeyed your village’s order. How daring you are!’ said the landlord sarcastically.

‘My wife was stubborn, saying that the girls in the next village are going to school and that her sister’s children are studying too. She was the one who insisted that I send Syamamma,’ said Balappa, trembling.

‘Who has given you your lip and your impudence, you scoundrel?’ the landlord raged, looking around for a weapon to beat Balappa with. Finding no stick, he picked up a paperweight from his table and flung it at Balappa’s face. It struck him on the forehead and blood flowed copiously. Balappa stood still. The landlord’s wrath did not abate. ‘However much we beat you, your kind shows neither respect nor shame!’ he said, and standing on the platform, kicked Balappa on the chest. Balappa fell backward on to the wall behind him.

Srirama Sharma, looking on, said, ‘Why do you beat him? It’s such a nuisance! Look ahead at what needs to be done. What is the use of beating these mala and madiga, or

talking to them? The government has no shame. “Education for all” they say! If everybody is educated, who will do the work? Each person has an occupation, a skill. Our village is a self-contained republic—where the barber, the dhobi, the cobbler and the labourer … each has his own function and place. Each has to do his duty. The work of the jogini has to be done by Baliga’s daughter. We have already taken this decision.’

Turning to Balappa, Sharma continued, ‘You knew this. This obstinacy is your downfall, you wretch. What has happened to you? Didn’t the poor patel explain everything to you with the greatest patience?’

Turning to the landlord, Sharma said, ‘He is bleeding profusely. If he is left here for long, this place will become impure. What if he dies here? Have him sent out immediately.’

The patel’s labourers hurried in and picked Balappa up by his legs and shoulders, carried him out and threw him on the street. The news of Balappa’s beating spread through the village like wildfire, reaching his wife and mother.

His mother Sangamma, hair undone, came hurrying to the spot and seeing him, wailed, beating her chest and forehead. She clutched Balappa to her bosom and sobbed inconsolably. ‘You were born to me after so many penances, my son. You were never a man who harmed even an ant. How did those hands find the will to beat you? Who were the blackguards who did this? May those hands be stricken by leprosy! May robbers crush those fingers!’ Muttering to herself, she cried, looking around her for something. She cradled his head on her lap and used the sari end to press the wound on his forehead. The bleeding continued.

Balappa’s wife, who was beside him, cried out, ‘What injustice is this, my lord? What sin have we committed? May we not live in this world?’ She started looking around for a healing shrub. She found it behind the landlord’s cowshed, brought a few stalks, and squeezed the juice on to Balappa’s forehead. Even then the bleeding continued. She squeezed the stalks even more and put the crushed residue in the wound and pressed it down. Sangamma held it fast on the forehead. Balappa’s wife went to the inner door of the landlord’s house and began to ask his wife for some water. Even before she had completed her request, the landlady cut in, ‘Why have you come here, woman? If the patel sees you here, he will kill me! Go away,’ and banged the door shut. Balappa’s wife went to the house of another landlord, Ram Reddy, who belonged to another political party, and begged at the inner door, ‘Amma, I’ll fall at your feet, I beg you. Please give me some water. My husband’s mouth and tongue are caked dry and he cannot speak. Blood is flowing in a stream. Please give me some water.’

‘Yes, all of you had raised Anantha Reddy on your heads, calling him patela, patela! All of you cast your votes for him and made him win the election. You got my husband defeated. Didn’t you have any brains then? Now you come asking for water! I went to

every mala and madiga house asking each one of you to cast your vote. All of you said you would. But none of you did. This is how our times have become unjust! What can we do?' said the landlady, pouring out her woes to Balappa's wife.

'Amma! Please give me some water, Amma,' she reminded her.

'Water? You are asking for water? Where should I pour it? Why haven't you brought your vessel? Go! Get it now,' replied the landlady.

'Amma, where can I get a vessel now? My house is far away. By the time I return with it, he'll be dead. I beg you. I am your servant. Please give me the water in some vessel,' she pleaded.

'There is a toilet mug on the shelf in the cattle shed. Bring it. I'll pour water in it for you,' said the lady.

Ananthamma's heart broke. She looked at the landlady's face. But she realized that it was not her moment, ran and brought the mug. The landlady poured water. As she carried the leaky mug back, all the water drained away. She flung the mug to the ground and looked around her. The doors of all the houses were shut. The reddy–komati neighbourhood was deserted. There was no chance of getting water anywhere. Just then, the mala woman Kashamma was returning from work to feed her child. She looked at Ananthamma and asked, 'What happened, my aunt? Why are you crying?'

'Your uncle has no water to drink and is half-dead,' replied Ananthamma.

'Ayyo! He is in such a bad condition!' Kashamma replied. Then she had a wild idea, and hesitated, looking around furtively. 'We could give him some breast milk at least,' she suggested. Ananthamma looked at her, speechless with gratitude. Both of them hurried to Balappa's side. Ananthamma cupped her palm and Kashamma squeezed milk from her breast to fill it up. Ananthamma carefully poured the milk into Balappa's mouth. In this way Kashamma gave seven or eight palms full of milk. They put some of the milk on the wound.

'Enough. You need to feed the baby,' said Ananthamma.

'Don't worry. There will be more milk soon. But if people know I did this, my life will be hell! I'll go now,' said Kashamma and hurried away into the lanes between the compound walls. Slowly, the bleeding stopped, but Balappa's eyes did not open. He lay in a faint.

The landlord emerged from the house after making a phone call and saw the fallen Balappa, the women surrounding him, the rusty mug on the ground.

'Where did you find the water, you bitches? Why are you gathered here as if your house has been burned down?' he shouted. Turning to his labourers, he asked, 'You madiga bastards, why did you let them come here?' He ranted at the women, 'It is

because I employ your mala and madiga men that they let you in,' and then wheeled back at his workmen, 'You have great love for your caste, have you? Remove these people from here immediately! Take them to the grass stacks. Leave them there and get back to work at the well,' he said.

The two men took Balappa and put him near a grass stack. The women followed them and sat down. His mother called out, 'Balappa! Balappa!' He stirred a little and tried to open his eyes. The women watched him and wiped the bloodstains off his face with their sari ends. The labourers said, 'God knows when the landlord will come and when you will go home. Take this tiffin and hide it so that someone doesn't see it,' and, giving them their lunch packs, left them.

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Appa slowly opened his eyes and saw us. He saw me and tried to get up immediately. He swayed, 'Amma,' and fell back again. He waved me close to him. 'Why did you come, my dear Syamamma? All this is for your sake!' he cried. My mother and grandmother sobbed inconsolably. I wondered why, after having beaten him so much, the landlord had had him put near the haystack. Nobody knew. Whatever the reason, my father was awake, and the bleeding had stopped. He could speak to us, and we were all a little calmer. We waited anxiously, wondering what the landlord was up to. In a while, five or six men in white khadi walked towards us, among them the police sub-inspector and the village elders. My father saw them and sank back. He then remembered what the hostel warden had assured him and took courage. The landlord too was not as angry as before. They were advancing with some papers in their hands. We saw them and stood up immediately. My father tried to stand, but fell back and lay there, as limp as the bloodstained clothes he had on him. He cried out, 'Amma, Amma,' and bit his teeth to try and stop the pain.

The landlord walked up and said, 'Baliga, you did not listen to our words. You made me beat you unnecessarily. We all know what a good person you are. You saved my life once. Will I ever forget?' Turning to his companions, he said, 'On that day in the fields, Baliga and Kurva Malliga were with me. Malliga took the cattle home to tie them up and bring me food. At that time, robbers came to steal the tuvar dal and were filling up their sacks. When I tried to stop them, they raised their axes. At that moment, Baliga snatched an axe from one of the robbers and brandished it at them. All of them ran away. While he turned on them, I found time to hide behind the paddy heaps. Then Baliga chased them away with his ironclad staff. He saved both my life and grain worth thousands of rupees. At that time I had called him a hero.'

Turning to Appa, he said, 'Now you have become too stubborn and wooden-headed and do not listen to anyone. We are telling you this for your own good. When you live in

a place, you must maintain good relations with everyone. You must listen to the village voice. You should not forget the village's command. Without thinking of all this, you put your girl in school. Even if she does study, what is going to come of it? How is she going to study alone in a different town? Times are bad now. If we settle her as a jogini in our village, she will constantly be watched over. What is there in study, Baliga? However much you study, you can't escape labour, can you? If she grows up a bit, what guarantee is there that she won't follow some man who makes a living selling tea and washing teacups? If you decide to keep your girl in school after this much has happened, it is your decision. But you'll not be permitted to stay in this village. We'll tell you what we want, you listen,' said the patel.

Appa looked at the group of men, cowering like an animal in front of a pride of lions. All of the others nodded in unison, agreeing with the patel. Sangamma, standing by him, began sobbing. My mother, standing beside the grass stack, cried out, 'Oh my god, my home has been destroyed!'

The elders were furious. 'These women make an unnecessary racket. Kick them on their kidneys! The pain will shut their mouths and keep them down!' one of them said. My mother and grandmother fell silent.

'Listen carefully. The patel is speaking only for your good,' advised Srirama Sharma, as if he were taking a class.

The patel said, 'Look, we don't know what you are thinking. Until now, if we have told you to do one thing, you have done something else. If we told you something for your own good, it did not enter your thick skull. I'll now tell you what I have decided. After this it is your choice. I asked you to make your daughter a jogini, but not for my sake. It was for the good of the village. Why is it that this fact does not enter your dull mind? I have no patience to talk to you any further! Either you make your girl a jogini, or leave the village. If you persist and stay on in the village stubbornly, you'll share Madiga Jangadu's fate! Beware!'

As soon as they heard this, my parents and my grandmother trembled. They saw before their eyes, Jangayya, a strapping young man, screaming as he was burnt to death. All the malas and madigas were grief-stricken by Jangayya's death, but no one could cry. Why? This was because the patel alleged that he practised magic, searched his hut and found turmeric, kumkum and lemons—the well-known and convenient tools of that trade! So they garlanded him with old truck tyres and set him afire in the village square. Everybody was terrified; if they cried, they too would be charged with practising magic. No one—relatives, siblings, or parents—came to his funeral. After he died, people felt that nobody should die such a death. Appa used to say so often, 'Jangayya was an innocent man. Nobody could say an ill word of him. He saved money by working hard and often starving himself and bought a bit of land. Then the patel's eye

fell on that land and he killed Jangayya. Everybody knew this, but nobody spoke up.' When my family was threatened with this fate, they feared the worst. My father's eyes were downcast.

'Now, without being too clever, sign these papers and I'll write the land transfer document,' said the patel.

Appa could actually write well—he was the first person who taught me how to read and write. Not only that, he was also the person who taught the dramatist Pothuluri Veerabrahmam's play to our community troupe. But he did not make any move to sign the papers. The realization that his land was being grabbed from him was such a great blow that he forgot he knew to write. He looked on, dazed. He had to lose either his daughter or his land. Left without an escape route, my family stood silent like puppets.

'Come on now! How long do we have to wait for you?' said the patel men. They came to my father and Sangamma and forced both their thumbprints on the paper.

'Here—take this money for your bus fare! Leave the village immediately,' said the patel, giving Appa a few green notes.

'From now on, the red earth field will not be ours!

The black clay field beside the canal will not be ours!

The madiga quarter will not be ours!

The home and yard we were born and brought up in will not be ours!

The house we had built with lime and mortar will not be ours!

We have become birds without a nest!

We have become orphans without a place to go!'

Sangamma and my mother cried out in lament, rolling on the ground.

To no avail! We boarded the bus to town—only the clothes we wore belonged to us.

'We've suffered this fate because we decided to send you to study. We'll support you through our labour as long as our limbs are able. Don't worry, daughter. Study well and become a big officer,' said my family, and this was the courage that took me through my education.

My childhood, marked by a refusal to become a jogini, and by my father losing his land, is a raw wound for my family, for my community and for me—a throbbing memory even today.

Jajula Gowri

‘Gowri is not a person, she is a phenomenon,’ Johnson Choragudi, a critic and journalist, is reported to have said, describing Jajula Gowri. This remarkable woman was taken out of school and married at thirteen, at twenty was the mother of two in a family battling extreme poverty, but by forty had become a recognized writer and a practising lawyer. Between 1986 (the year her daughter was born) and 2004 (when she took on a job as rainwater harvesting ‘motivator’ in an NGO and her husband was made permanent in his factory job after nineteen years of temporary wage work), she says, she ‘struggled everyday with the anxiety of hunger’. Her drive and optimism are awe-inspiring. She wants, she told us, to establish a Poverty-Leaving Foundation for others like her. ‘I can say this about her,’ her senior in the law office observed as he served us the tea he had made while we were interviewing her, ‘if Gowri sets her mind on something, she will make it happen.’

Born in 1969 in Jajulabayigadda, a small settlement of five families, near Lothukunta on the outskirts of Secunderabad, to Jajula Malliah and Lashmamma, agricultural labourers who worked off-season as construction labour, Gowri was one of seven children. Her father owned two acres of land and had a ration shop in Yapral. Sometimes they sowed two crops a year, sometimes only one. ‘Our family was conscious of their madigathanam [the word refers to the services rendered by the madigas to the upper-castes in the village; in those days, the madigas saw these as a caste duty] and loyally served their dora. We owned no land until the time of my grandmother, who had managed to buy eight acres. We led a minimal existence and followed the Hindu tradition.’ When she and her twin sister were sent to school, it was primarily a way of ensuring their safety, since they would keep wandering off in search of their mother. They were the first girls in Lothukunta Primary School. Many of Gowri’s stories, including her well-known ‘Mannubuvva’ (Mud Food, 1998), are set against this backdrop.

‘Until I was in the third or fourth class, I knew nothing about caste. Then one day, I was thirsty after I had eaten the upma we got at school and asked my friend, Sulochana, who lived close by, for water.

‘“Where do you live?” her mother asked.

‘“Jajulabayigadda,” I replied.

‘That was enough for her to identify me. She brought out a metal container and poured the water into my hands from a height. I drank it, but when I got home, I asked my mother the reason for this peculiar behaviour. She explained. I had never heard the word “madiga” before. I decided at that point that I would study hard and excel.’

Gowri moved on to the Lal Bazaar Zilla Parishad Girls’ High School in the seventh class, leaving it in 1982, when she was in the eighth class, to be married. ‘I wanted to study and did not want to get married (I had no idea what marriage was, except that it would involve my leaving school), but I was very fond of my parents and did not protest.’ Her husband, D. Nagaraj, had migrated from Tandur and was a contract worker at the Allwyn Company, earning 300 rupees a month.

‘I’ve always wanted to study. I wanted to be like my first teacher, Annamma. She was a brahmin, but she used to share her food with me. Even after my marriage, I would look for a newspaper—even if it was a wrapping from the shop—and read it. I was an avid fan of Yendamuri Veerendranath’s column in *Andhra Bhoomi*. My taste for literature goes back to my parents. We used to sit around at night while they told us stories. My mother used to sing—she knew more than a hundred songs. Initially, I used to dismiss them as just village songs. I listened to the radio and sang film songs. Then I heard a film song that was actually my mother’s song!

‘I sing a lot. It is through song that I figured out for myself the form of poetry—rhyme, rhythm and repetition. I loved Telugu literature. Even though I was only in the eighth, I used to read the tenth-class books. My teachers praised me and I grew confident. My mother, father, closeness to nature, love for poetry and its form, all these fed into the growth of my skill as a writer.

‘In 1989, after my son was born, our economic situation reached a crisis point. I had to leave the ECG meter factory where I was working for Rs 7.25 a day. My family gave us between twenty and fifty rupees, but that was all they could manage; they were so poor themselves. I left my six-month-old child with a neighbour and found work in a local nursing home as an ayah. I was chided there for dressing neatly [draping her sari like a middle-class woman and confusing the patients] and speaking like an educated person. My baby’s health was affected. The sight of blood would make me dizzy. It was all too much. I left the hospital, vowing that I would study and make good.

‘In the leather factory, where I found a job for 400 rupees a month, there were some educated workers—people who had passed the tenth class, even intermediate. They brought newspapers and I would read them along with the others. Sharada, my friend, would often say, “No one can imagine that you have only studied until the eighth; you sound like a graduate.” Then the Open University notifications came out. We talked about them. They paid the 100 rupees for my application form. In 1993, I registered for

my BA. I would go regularly every Sunday to Begumpet Women's College. I was the one with the least education.

'The leather company collapsed. I found a new job as a receptionist. It paid me 500 rupees a month. I was to answer the phone, but I had never held a phone in my hand before that! My employer was patient and supported me. He subscribed to a paper for us to read and encouraged my studies.

'Then came the day that was a turning point for me as a writer. It was 14 April 1996. A Sunday. Ambedkar's birthday. I was in my final year. The university announced a competition for speeches on Ambedkar. I did not know about it, but I saw everyone rushing to the conference hall. I went too and found people making speeches on Ambedkar. Prabhanjan Kumar Yadav [who translated Kancha Illaiah's *Why I Am Not a Hindu* into Telugu] was the judge. A kind of intense anger began to rise in me. Here were all these upper-caste children, who knew nothing about caste or its misery, who knew nothing about anything, giving speeches on Ambedkar. I thought to myself, Ambedkar is my father. I am here because of him. And these people, they even opposed the awarding of the Bharat Ratna to him. I myself had not read Ambedkar until 1991 when I first got hold of a copy of his autobiography. Until then, I did not even know who Ambedkar was. But reading his autobiography, for the first time, I understood my experience. So this is it. This is what it is. Caste, dalits, untouchability. This explains my life.

'The speeches were over. The judge rose—he is one of my godfathers, really; the others are Nagappagari Sunderraju, K.G. Satyamurthy, B.S. Ramulu—and asked: "Is there anyone else in the hall who would like to speak?" I was given five minutes. I took twenty. I spoke about Ambedkar and me and where I came from. The reason I was at the university was Ambedkar. I got the first prize. I had spoken spontaneously, without any preparation. Yadav talked to me afterwards and asked whether I wrote. My own struggles at home, outside, at work, came into my poetry. There was a deep anger inside and, whenever I found myself embattled, I would sit and write. I had about a hundred poems. I gave them to him.

'He took me to meet Satyamurthy [the legendary Naxalite leader]. I had no idea who Satyamurthy was. I really knew nothing about the world, about politics. Study, work, home took up all my time. I read nothing extra, had no books. The first book I ever possessed was *Chikkanavutunna Pata* [a collection of dalit poetry], which I bought for forty rupees!'

Yadav encouraged her to study journalism. He took her to Osmania University and helped her prepare for the entrance tests. She got in. That was the time that the Madiga Dandora movement was active. The question of equality among dalits was being discussed. 'I was writing a lot. As though my poetry was a weapon!' she says. The poet

Nagappagari Sunderraju read her poetry and wrote her an eight-page letter. 'An eight page letter for me—about my poetry! This was what I had been looking for and I had found it, here, in the city itself.' He wrote her twelve such letters, commenting on her work, encouraging her, giving her information about where to publish, about when the literary page appears in which newspaper. "You are a dalit, a madiga. Write about your own experience, your consciousness." I wrote many poems in support of Dandora, including one, "Nenu Nenuga" (As I Am), where I said our own kind is cheating us today. It became very controversial. K.G. Satyamurthy, he is a mala, apparently said, "I can't believe Gowri has written this." I was upset. Somewhere deep down I wanted my writing to be beyond criticism.

'Around this time, I began to write stories for Madiga Sahitya Vedika. I drew on the stories told by my mother, my grandfather. I called up Nagappagari Sunderraju to discuss this new initiative. "Write about things that touched you, hit you, hurt you … write from your life, your experience." That is when I wrote "Mannubuvva". This story was published in a collection of stories, *Eduru Chupulu: Katha Sankalanam* (Waiting: A Collection of Stories, 1999), edited by Gundedappu Kanakaiah. Critics like Poranki Dakshinamurthy, Nanumasa Swamy and Kanakaiah appreciated this story in the introduction to the collection. Kolkaluri Enock enquired about me after reading the story. That four-page story in the Telangana language has been reprinted about twenty times. I came to be known as "Mannubuvva Gowri".

'I was so inspired, I wrote twenty stories immediately after this and became well known as a story writer. In 2011, I was awarded the Rangavalli Puraskaram. Meanwhile, I had completed my BCJ, MCJ and MA. But our financial problems had not eased. For three months, I worked for *Kesari* magazine. The salary promised was 2,000 rupees a month, but I never got paid anything. I was furious. That is when I decided I needed to be able to stand on my own. In 2002, I enrolled for an LLB, which I completed in 2005. The principal of the Law College, Shankar Rao, encouraged me. I am now a practising lawyer working primarily on women's issues.'

Between 2004 and 2008, she worked with the NGO Prakruti as a rainwater harvesting motivator and as a youth development officer and in other capacities. Today, she is a lawyer and a very well-known writer. She published her first collection of twenty-five stories *Mannubuvva: Jajula Gowri Kathalu* in 2004. That year she received eight awards, including the Sushila Narayana Reddy Award for these stories. B.S. Ramulu, dalit– bahujan writer and scholar, encouraged her to apply for that last award. Her stories are now prescribed as part of the MA syllabus in Sree Krishnadevaraya University and Yogi Vemana University.

I Am Like None Other

Translated by A. Suneetha

It took us an hour to reach school on foot. Only three or four children from Jajulabayi colony went to any school. My brother, Yadagiri, was the first one. He joined the school at Bollaram. My sister and I were admitted to the Lothukunta government school. Among the girls, my younger sister and I were the first ones.

Mother was always busy with agricultural and domestic work. She hardly found time to look after us during the day. Often, it was mid-afternoon by the time she managed to have a wash and her first meal of the day!

On one of those days, she went to Yapral to get 'ration' from the store. My younger sister and I were left at home.

We waited for a while and decided to go look for her. We took a path along the railway track that reached the grass farm. Halfway through, we found her. She was walking back with a sack of rice on her head and a bag of sugar in hand. From the Keverley Bridge, she recognized us.

She rushed to us. 'Why have you come here, my children?'

We were thrilled to see her. 'Simply. What did you bring for us? Did you buy anything?'

She refused to pay any attention to our questions. 'Who asked you to follow me? This road has heavy military vehicle traffic. What would happen if one of them hit you? Come, let us return home.'

'Oh! Do the vehicles hit people on this road? How come I never saw that happen?'

'Gowaraalu, it is difficult to explain how vehicles hit people. Why did you bring your younger sister too? Let us go back now.'

She adjusted the sack of rice on her head and walked home with the bag of sugar in one hand and Sister's hand in the other. Sister giggled as I sprinted ahead of them. I turned back frequently to check if they were watching me. Even Mother couldn't help but laugh at my joyful antics. By the time we reached home, it was afternoon.

Once we reached, she dropped the sack and the bag on the raised platform in the front yard. Perhaps her neck hurt with the weight of the bag. She flopped to the floor and handed the house keys to me. 'My child, can you get me some water in a tumbler? I feel breathless.'

Sister and I unlocked the house, shoved each other to enter the house first. After a tussle, we emerged with a tumbler each for Mother. In the meantime, Mother had taken a

piece of charcoal from the wood stove to clean her teeth.

Just then, Vijjakka arrived, with her baby brother Surender nestled in the crook of her arm. Unable to hide her surprise, she asked, 'How come you are you cleaning your teeth at this hour, my aunt?'

'What can I tell you? By the time I finished the morning chores, it was late. Then I went to get ration from Yapral. Yijjamma, couldn't you have kept an eye on these children? When I was returning after collecting the ration, I found these two at the grass-farm!'

Yijjakka covered her mouth in horror. 'Don't tell me that they walked till the grass farm. Today, my parents went to Gadibayi to pick ladies finger and I had to take Surender there to be breastfed at eleven. When I came back, I couldn't find these two here and wondered if they had gone off to play!' She threw an angry glance at us. 'These children have no work and can't seem to stay where they should. Hey, where did you go?'

'Nowhere, nowhere!' My sister and I giggled and chased each other in circles.

Having restrained her anger thus far, Mother got irritated with our silly antics. She took a cane lying nearby and hit each of us twice on our backs.

Stunned by this sudden onslaught, both of us started howling. That did not stop her from scolding us further, 'Didn't I tell you to stay at home, yet you decide to follow me? What would I do if you were hit by a vehicle on that road? Did you know that a lot of military vehicles use that road?'

Yijjakka put baby Surender down, rushed to Mother, snatched the cane and urged her, 'Aunt. Stop. They are very young. How would they know that the road is frequented by motors? They must have simply followed you. Why don't you please stop?' She threw the cane aside.

We scampered off to the monkey pod tree, held each other tightly and continued to sob, staring at Mother.

Mother went to have a wash at the well. 'If you persist in doing such mad things, I will do what I should.'

Our sobbing continued.

Once she finished washing, she called out, 'Gowraalu, Gangaalu, why don't you please come here and have a wash, my children.'

How can she beat us and expect us to go rushing when she calls? We were mad at her. Both of us refused to budge from our place under the tree.

'That is okay. You do it when you feel like.' She went right back into the house. We were taken aback, but still did not move.

She noticed that we were in no mood to budge. Wiping her face with the end of the sari, she came over. ‘Why don’t you come, my children?’

I sobbed, ‘I won’t. Why did you hit us?’

Sister also repeated after me, ‘I also won’t come. Go.’

‘What do I do, children? Why do you follow me wherever I go? What would I do if something happened to you?’

She took us to the bathroom, cleaned and wiped our faces. We were taken into the house and given bananas to eat. She had hidden them in the rice sack.

That night, Mother spoke at length with Father about us. In that conversation, I heard one word repeatedly—school.

Before the end of that week, she admitted us in the Lothukunta government school. That is how we started school. For two or three days, she accompanied us. Unable to find time to go with us every day, she showed us the shorter routes. She explained that walking on the main road would lead to accidents and that we should always take these other paths.

From our colony, there were three shortcuts to school. The first one, off the main road near Komati Narayana’s house, went past the houses of Avusula Janabai and Sulochana, and joined the main road at the Pochamma shrine. The second one was from Janimiya’s house past Ashok seth’s shop and reached the shrine. The third one was from the tamarind tree, where Janimiya’s cycle repair shop was located, past the houses of Alivelu and Bhaskar and then hit the shrine. All the three paths met at the Pochamma shrine. If you get onto the main road from this shrine, you reach the toddy compound and the shops. Then you cross the houses of Rekharani and Vanaja, go past the chakali [washerfolk’s] houses and the Vijayalakshmi Hotel, run by a tenuga. Our school lay a little ahead.

Sulochanarani, Rekharani, Vanaja, Vijayalakshmi, Bhaskar and Alivelu were my classmates. At first, my sister and I took the path off Sulochana’s house that reached Alivelu’s house. We would watch our friends’ houses on our way to school. Their houses looked so much better than ours. Our pals were friendly in school, but refused to talk to us at home. For quite some time, I could not understand why they behaved so strangely. After a while, I began to feel that it might be because of my clothes. I knew that we were very poor, but Annamma teacher never mentioned it. So, how could I possibly know about these differences?

In the first standard, when we began to practise the Telugu alphabet, it felt new and strange. Writing also seemed very difficult. But Annamma teacher would praise anyone who completed writing work quickly. Since I too wanted such appreciation, I gingerly practised the alphabet on my slate. When I walked back home, I recited it by turning it

into a song. Once we reached home, we would wash up and eat if there was something, or else go to play. Meena, Radha, Enkatesu, Rameshu and my aunt's son Yadgadu, Anju sister-in-law's son Narsigadu and Narender were my playmates at home. When we all met, we talked about school.

I would ask Meena, 'Why don't we tell each other what we learnt at school?' I thought such an exchange would facilitate quicker learning, but nobody was interested. They played daldadi, jingannabbila, kuntikalata, kolata, chemmachekkalata, naalugu dabbalata, etc. I would play for a while and then return to practise the alphabet with a charcoal in my front yard, on the walls, the front platform till late afternoon.

At eight in the night, either Sudanna or Yadgirianna invariably arrived to take us home. Mother would be looking for us by then. Father would have returned home from work. After having a meal together, we all went to sleep.

I would wake up early in the morning and once again start my loud recitation of the alphabet to impress my father. This is how I completed my first and second standard at school.

I was in third class by the time I understood why my friends behaved so strangely. We did not have the kind of 'dresses' that they had, but we always kept our two 'dresses' clean. Still, in comparison, we felt that we did not look good.

In summer, school closed at half-time. We returned home after eating the upma served at school. It was a hot afternoon. My sister and I wanted to visit Sulochana's house and Alivelu also joined us. We had finished the upma by the time we reached the Pochamma shrine.

I threw the paper aside, 'Sulochana, we will come to your house today. I am very thirsty. Will you give us some water to drink?'

'Yes, I will.' She took us home.

Her mother was seated in front of the house. Her glance swept us from top to bottom, 'Why have they come here?'

Sulochana pointed to us with her hand, 'They want some drinking water, Mother.'

'Is that so? Go and bring water in a tumbler.' She turned to us, fixed her sharp gaze on us, 'Where do you come from, girl?'

Intimidated by her look, I swallowed hard, 'From Jajulabayi.'

'Is that near Suddabayi and Gaadibayi orchard?'

'Yes, it's where the military is stationed. Our houses are near the well adjacent to it.'

As soon as she heard that, she pulled Alivelu aside, 'Oh my child, why are you standing here?' Alivelu was sent inside the house.

We thought we could also join her, but we weren't invited in.

Sulochana returned with a tumbler and was about to hand it over to me. My thirst increased at the sight of this tumbler and I hastened to take it from her.

'Hey, wait!' Sulochana's mother snatched the tumbler from her hand. 'I will pour the water and you drink.'

She stood on the raised platform in front of the house and started pouring water from the tumbler. My sister handed her bag to me, quickly went over to drink. I too joined her. The way Alivelu and Sulochana gaped at me, the water didn't go down my throat and I began to choke.

I stopped, tapped myself on the head, took the bag of books from my sister's hand and turned towards home. When I turned to look at Sulochana's house halfway down the path, I found Alivelu and Sulochana still gaping at us open-mouthed.

After that, I was terrified of drinking water at their house.

Another time, when I asked Rekharani for water, she too brought water in a tumbler. 'Let me pour the water for you.' Since I was thirsty, I drank the water, though my heart protested. After that, even chaakali Vanaja did the same. I forsook their friendship and stuck to Alivelu and Vijayalakshmi. But my mind didn't stop searching for the reasons for their behaviour.

Vijayalakshmi's family owned a small teashop. It had two benches and four chairs. Her mother served everyone tea. After we became friends with Vijayalakshmi, we drank water in their hotel. I never dared to ask Alivelu for water because I loved her dearly. She never let go of our friendship, even after Sulochana, Rekharani and Vanaja's families treated us in this manner. I knew that we would get the same treatment at Alivelu's house too. Even if she wanted to treat us well, her mother wouldn't allow her to. I had no intention of spoiling my friendship with her.

Once, during the school interval, my sister and I went to draw water from the school well to quench our thirst. Rekharani and Sulochana also reached there. I offered the leftover water from the bucket, 'Sulochana, do you want it?'

Their faces suddenly changed colour. 'No. Why don't you move aside? We will draw our water from the well.' So, right in front of us, they washed that bucket with the leftover water and drew another bucket from the well. After drinking some, they washed their feet with the rest.

I watched the entire episode. On reaching the classroom, I asked Alivelu why they did all this.

She looked around to make sure that nobody was in hearing distance, 'Do you know what Sulochana's mother told us when you went to their house?'

I held Alivelu's hand, 'Tell me. What did she say?'

'That you are low caste. That day she enquired where you lived, right? That's when she said this. She told us that all the people living near that well are madiga. And that we should not touch you. Sulochana told all of us that the families of Sulochana, Rekharani, Vanaja and Vijayalakshmi are of high caste. That is why everyone treats you like that when you want water. By the way, Gowaralu, what is your caste? But what is caste?'

'I don't know what caste is. I only heard it from you all. Let me find out from my mother what it is.'

I remembered the song that occasionally played on the radio. Even that song mentioned caste. I couldn't wait any longer.

That day, after we finished our lunch at one o'clock, I ran to Annamma teacher. She was reading a book. She liked me immensely and I liked her just as much.

I approached her table. 'Teacher?'

'Why are you here, Gowri?'

I pursed my lips and wrung my hands, 'Nothing, teacher.'

'Then why don't you go and play? Don't disturb me.'

'Teacher, what is a caste, teacher?'

She cast an anxious look in my direction, 'Who mentioned that word to you?'

I repeated my question, 'No one said anything, teacher. But what is caste?'

She kept her thoughts to herself. 'Our ancestors established castes according to one's occupation and divided up society. But all human beings are one. The same blood flows in all of us. We are all children of God. We created these castes. I will never forgive those who divide people according to caste. Has anyone said anything to you?' she asked angrily.

'No, teacher. I heard this song on radio that everybody is of same caste, same religion and is protected by one God, and I just wanted to know its meaning.'

She burst out laughing and tapped me slightly on the cheek, 'You silly child, these thoughts are too big for your small head. Go and play.'

I came out with a hand on my cheek. I finally understood why Sulochanarani and Rekharani kept a distance from me. Annamma teacher's words that she would not tolerate anyone who 'divided people in the name of caste' also echoed in my head.

In my class, Sulochanarani, Rekharani, Srinivas, Durgareddy and I performed more or less at the same level in the exams.

After this episode, I repeatedly told myself that I should also perform well in the classroom, not merely in the exams. I wanted to trounce everyone by staying on top in my studies.

After the interval, we had a Telugu class. Towards the end, Saraswati teacher told us to learn the names of 'Telugu months' by the next day.

That is it. I stepped out of the class reciting 'chaitram, vaisakham' and reached home reading aloud the names of the months from the textbook. I wasn't keen on playing or eating. I fell asleep reciting the names in front of the lamp.

Next morning, I woke up at the sound of the cock's crow, sat in front of the lamp and recited the names again. Finally, I managed to learn all the names. My father, impressed with my recitation, said to my mother, 'Look Lakshmi, my daughter recites like a brahmin child.' I sprang to my feet, went to him and announced, 'I do not imitate anyone. I read in my own style.'

At school, I waited for one o'clock. After the lunch break, we returned to the classroom. My eyes were fixed on the clock. The Telugu teacher always asked the toppers first. I was aware of this. I also knew what happened if the toppers failed and someone else answered correctly. All this while, both they and I managed to answer correctly. But reeling out the names of all the Telugu months is a difficult task. I was intent on making it this time. Even if they manage to recite the names, I wouldn't have to lose at their hands. I would come out as their equal.

Just as I expected, Teacher opened her textbook. 'Did you all do yesterday's homework?'

'Yes, Teacher, we did,' everyone said in a chorus.

'You all say so. But there are only five children in this class who can give correct answers. You should all learn from them.'

She beckoned Rekharani, 'Rekha, why don't you tell us the names of Telugu months?'

Rekharani set out, 'chaitram, vaisakham, jestam, jestam …' but could not go any further. Then Srinivas tried. He came to a stop at sravanam. Durgareddy repeated this performance. Sulochana and I were the next ones in queue. Usually, we figured as first and the last in these sessions. Today, my calculation went awry. I wondered if teacher would make me go first. Would she be interested in asking Sulochana, even after I answered correctly? My heart beat fast with all these anxious questions.

Finally, Teacher looked at both of us, 'Sulochana, will you try now?'

Gritting her teeth, Sulochana answered, but halted at 'aswijam'.

'This is my chance,' I thought, looking at Sulochana.

'Will you answer today?' Alivelu softly murmured in my ear.

Nonplussed by this poor performance from her top students, teacher wondered aloud, 'Whatever happened to you four today?'

'We did study hard, Teacher, but we are not able to memorize the names. It is very difficult,' said Rekha.

Teacher got angry, 'Why wouldn't you remember if you studied? I don't think you did. You are panting to remember the names of Telugu months. Gowri, why don't you tell us now?'

Having lain in wait for my chance, I quickly got up to reel off the answer, 'There are twelve Telugu months. Their names are chaitram, vaisakham, jestam, aasadam, sravanam, bhadrapadam, aswijam, kartikam, margasiram, pushyam, magham, falgunam,' and stopped to catch my breath. I passed the first exam that I set for myself. Now there is only one more exam left.

Teacher gave me a congratulatory look. 'Well done, Gowri. I didn't expect you to answer this question at all.'

Turning to the top four in class, she announced, 'Why do you find it difficult to learn the names of Telugu months? Your parents are educated. Gowri's parents are not. If you had the will, you would have found a way. Gowri, now it is time for you to give each of them a slap.'

Even as she urged me to slap these donkeys, I didn't feel like doing it to Srinivas or Durgareddy. They had never said anything bad about me. I felt bad to do this to them. If they had behaved like Rekharani or Sulochana, I wouldn't have hesitated to punish them. So, I pretended to be shy and told the teacher to punish the boys.

I approached Sulochanarani, held her nose and looked straight into her eyes. The eyes that proclaimed me as an untouchable were cast down now. I slapped her on both cheeks and repeated the same with Rekharani. Vengeful thoughts filled my head: 'You all thought I couldn't win, but I know how to score a victory over you.'

Signature

Translated by A. Suneetha

At Lothukunta primary school, the morning bell rings at nine. Children scattered in the playground gather at one place to stand in class-wise queues for the day's assembly. Once the pledge is read, the children go into their respective classrooms. Teachers

follow with their attendance registers. The principal stops the teachers of the fourth and fifth classes to discuss something. Once they reach his office, he brings out a few application forms from his almirah. 'These forms were sent by the social welfare office. You need to get them filled by all the SC/ST children in your classes within a week. We should submit them within ten days.' Lakshman Rao and Annamma take the forms to their classrooms along with the attendance registers. Once the day's lessons are completed, Lakshman Rao shows the forms to the students and announces, 'Those of you who are SCs and STs, raise your hands.' The children look at each other, doubtfully. Wondering if they have followed the question, he tries to elaborate, 'Are there any scheduled caste people among you?' Again, the children exchange looks, unable to comprehend what is going on.

One boy inquires, 'Saar, what is a scheduled caste?'

'Are there any students from madiga or mala castes among you?' The children still don't seem to understand. Surprised, he demands from them, 'You useless fellows, don't you know your caste?' The children shake their heads in negative. This time, it is the turn of a girl to ask, 'Saar, what is a caste?'

Lakshman Rao is taken aback and doesn't know how to respond. Choosing to ignore the question, he distributes the scholarship forms to the students and explains to them at a slow pace, 'Show these forms to your parents and return them after getting them filled. You will receive a monthly scholarship. All those who qualify in the fourth class will get forty rupees.'

As soon as they hear about money, the children's hopes are roused. They look intently at the forms, but their faces fall as they remember that they do not know what their caste is.

During lunch hour, Lakshman Rao sets off to the principal's office to discuss the emerging situation. Even before he finishes his account, Annamma teacher reaches there. With a knowing smile on his face, the principal inquires, 'What about you, Ms Annamma?'

'Sir, only two students took the form in my class,' she says, with a surprised look on her face. Explaining the situation of children not knowing their caste, the principal informs her, 'You have fared better than Mr Lakshman Rao.'

Annamma expresses her displeasure with the idea itself. 'In my class too, it's much like that. But, sir, how can such young children know about caste? At this tender age, when it is time for them to mingle and play, why should we divide them in the name of caste?'

The principal agrees with her. 'What you say is true. But this order is from the higher-ups. We have to discharge our duty.' He takes out the student admission register.

‘This contains all the details of the students. You can easily identify the scheduled caste students with the help of this register. Do it quickly. By this evening you should hand over the forms to all the eligible students. It may take them a week to return those. We have to submit the forms within ten days. Hurry up!’ Quickly, both the teachers note down the names of students from their respective classes. Just before the evening bell, they hand over the forms to all the scheduled caste students.

Ramudu, from the fourth standard, also gets the form. His face brightens up as soon as it comes into his hand. Fondly, he gazes at the form. It feels as if he already has forty rupees in his hand. Happiness borne of that thought suddenly overwhelms him. Skipping joyfully, he reaches home. No one is at home. Both his parents have left early for their daily wage work. He waits for them in the front yard. Just as the stars appear in the sky, they reach home. Rushing to them, he announces merrily, ‘Amma, they gave us scholarship forms at school. If I fill it up, I will be given forty rupees!’

Mallamma does not understand what he is saying, ‘What is a scholarship form, my son?’

‘I don’t know. Teacher told me that if I fill it up, they will submit it in some government office. Those people will give us money,’ Ramudu replies in a naughty tone.

Mallamma goes off to wash her feet. ‘Lets us go into the house and then I will look at the scholarship form.’ By the time she enters, Ramudu has taken it out of the bag and is standing with the form in his hand.

As soon as she enters the house, he stretches his hand, ‘Mother, this is the paper. It is called a scholarship form, I believe. These forms are given only for scheduled caste people, it seems. My teacher asked me what my caste is. Mother, tell me what a caste is.’ Ramudu inquires with a thoughtful frown on his face.

‘Caste is caste. There are people of lower and higher categories. The higher category people are called higher castes and lower ones are called lower castes. That is all.’

‘What is our caste then? Teacher said that lower castes have names.’

Mallamma gets impatient with the barrage of questions, ‘We are madigas, son, don’t you know even that?’

‘How would I know that? Neither you nor Father ever told me this,’ Ramudu shot back, twisting his hands.

‘Come, my son, let us find out from your father.’ Mallamma places the form in Rajayya’s hands, who is seated in the front yard. ‘Listen, our son was given this paper. It seems that it is a scholarship form. Why don’t you have a look at it?’

Rajayya takes a careful look at the form. It doesn’t make any sense to him. But he understood why it was given. ‘What is there to do? Last year, Lachumanna’s son also

got the form. We are supposed to write down the name of our caste, our address and signature. That is easy. But the real problem begins there. We need a dora's signature on it to prove that we are madiga. Strangely, we are counted as madiga in society, but when it comes to these forms, the higher-ups have to attest to the fact that we are madiga! How would they know? Is it written on our faces? When we approach them for signature, they will want to find out from us. Then they also ask us proof to claim that we are madiga. After all these inquiries, they still refuse to sign without a bribe! We will have to run around so much that we will wear our sandals out. What can we do? We are not educated people, so we cannot understand all these procedures. We don't need all this for ourselves, but we do need it for our children. The signature that we buy has become a proof of their life. Lachumanna got exhausted running around for this signature, you know?'

Mallamma scratches her head. 'Don't you lecture me now! Just say whose signature is needed on this form.'

'That is what I am telling you. It needs the signature of a doctor, an engineer or a big dora working in an office. They should be in government service. It is not possible for us to do. Just throw it aside,' Rajayya says angrily.

Ramudu winces at this straight talk from his father. He feels as if forty rupees were yanked out of his hands and thrown away.

Annoyed, Mallamma snatches the form from his hand, 'Should you talk in this cut and dried manner when we need your advice?'

Ramudu follows her into the house, pleading in a hopeful voice, 'Mother, please get this form attested. We will get some money.'

Mallamma expressed her pent-up anger with the husband on her son, 'Can't you wait, my son? You dumped it on me as soon as I walked in. I have a lot of unfinished work. Your father seems unaffected by any of this. Have a little patience. The form is not going to disappear.'

With his mother's outburst, Ramudu gets even more worried. He sits in a corner in a sulk. After cooking the meal, Mallamma serves dinner to Rajayya and Ramudu. Ramudu refuses to eat.

Rajayya gets annoyed with his son's behaviour, 'If you are so stubborn, it is you who will suffer. Get lost.'

Mallamma brushes aside her husband's annoyance, 'Just be quiet, will you? Why do you harangue him when he is already feeling bad? Can't you cajole him to have his meal, instead?' She tries to feed Ramudu, but he stubbornly refuses. Mallamma strokes his hair, pleads with him and makes him eat. 'Let us go to see Lachumanna. Just wait for a while. Once you eat, we will go.'

After the meal, she washes the vessels and sets out for Lachumanna's house in pitch darkness. Standing at his door, she calls out, 'O, Lachumanna!'

Lakshmaiah emerges out of the house, 'Is everything well, my sister? Why have you come here at this late hour?'

Mallamma pleads, 'Brother, Ramudu got this form at school. Can you please tell us what to do?'

He explains with patience, 'Sister, Ravi also got this form last year, but it was very difficult to get it attested. I ran around the government hospital for a whole week, but could not obtain it. Finally, another doctor agreed to sign, but charged twenty rupees. Now, that dora has moved out of town.'

'If that doctor is not around, I will go to the government hospital.'

Next morning, skipping work, Mallamma sets out early for the government hospital to reach there by nine. Ramudu accompanies her. They see a long queue of patients and find it impossible to enter the hospital to get the signature. The queue only lengthens as the day progresses. After a long wait, disappointed, she heads home.

On the second day, with increased determination, she reaches the government hospital early. The peon begins to allow the patients to enter, once the doctor is in. She joins the queue. When it is her turn, trembling inside, Mallamma enters the doctor's room.

Doctor asks, 'Who is sick? Is it you or your son?'

Mallamma replies hesitantly, 'No one is sick.'

The doctor gives her an impatient look. 'Then why are you here?'

Mallamma points to her son and pleads with her, 'He was given this form in school. I believe they will give some money. It requires your signature. Please sign on this.'

The doctor gets angry, 'Who do you think we are? Are we here to treat patients or sign on these forms? Why do you waste our time like this?' She shouts for the attendant, 'What do you do at the door? Is this the kind of people you send inside? Send them away right now.'

The attendant comes rushing inside. Holding Mallamma's arm and Ramudu's shirt collar, he drags them out, 'You people do this because you can't digest what you have eaten. Go away from here, you rascals.'

Not paying any attention to him, Mallamma keeps pleading with the doctor, 'O doctoramma, please sign on this form. God will bless you, please.' No one heeds her plea.

A terrified Ramudu begins to wail loudly. But his mother is not in a condition to notice. Drained of all energy after being dragged out of the hospital, she collapses onto

the ground under a tree. Her thoughts are focused on the application form now. She is even more determined to get the signature. She sits there, lost in thought, staring at the hospital building.

At twelve o'clock everyone leaves. The hospital attendant notices Mallamma. 'I have been watching you since morning. Why are you sitting here? What do you want?'

She breaks down.

He takes pity on her and promises to help. 'I will get a signature on the form, but that will cost you thirty rupees.'

'Saar, I am a daily wage labourer. Where will I get thirty rupees from? I get forty rupees per day. But I have lost two days' wages by now. Even my son could not attend school,' Mallamma pleads, shaking her head.

'Don't tell me all that. If you want the signature, you have to shell out money. No one is going to sign without money,' the attendant replies.

Ramudu's heart sinks on hearing this. In a worried tone, he says to Mallamma, 'Mother, why don't you give the money that Saar is asking for?'

'Saar, do take pity on my son. Please be kind to us. I can't shell out thirty rupees. Maybe twenty?'

Turning to Ramudu, the hospital attendant nods, 'Okay okay.' Looking around like a thief, he tells Mallamma, 'Fold the notes carefully in this paper, so that it is not recognizable.'

From the cloth bag in her sari fold, Mallamma takes out twenty rupees, carefully folds them in a paper and passes it on to the attendant. Quickly, he grabs the form, 'Tell me all your names and your address.' He notes down the details, folds the paper, keeps it in his pocket and warns them, 'Come back tomorrow at this time only. It won't be done by morning. People may also recognize you because there was such a ruckus in the morning.'

Mallamma gives him a sad look. 'Yes, Saar, I will come at this time. Please get it done, Saar. I am your slave. For this, God will bless you Saar.' She returns home with Ramudu.

That night, Rajayya picks up a quarrel with Mallamma. 'You bitch. You haven't come to work for two days, nor have you let Ramudu go to school. Didn't I tell you that these signatures are impossible to get? You ignore what I say and go off on your own? I won't tolerate it if you don't come to work from tomorrow.'

'Endayyo, why do you talk like that? Am I sitting idle or going around without work? You refuse to do it and forbid me from doing it. Who am I doing all this for? Isn't it for our boy? You can question me if I do something wrong. Today, fortunately, I found that

attendant saar. He assured that it would be done by tomorrow. If we hand it over in school, our task would be done.'

Mallamma doesn't reveal that the attendant demanded twenty rupees from her.

On the third day too, Mallamma doesn't go to work. By eleven, she is at the gate of the hospital. After everyone leaves, she finds the attendant and approaches him eagerly, along with her son.

He scolds them for such direct approach and takes them aside, 'You should not meet me in front of everyone. I would have given you the form anyway.' He takes out the form and hands it over to Mallamma.

She looks at it adoringly and salutes him, 'May you live long, Saar. May God bless you, Saar.' Mother and son return home.

On the fourth day, the son goes to school and the parents go to work. On his way to school, the events of the three days flit in Ramudu's head. Lakshman Rao punishes Ramudu for skipping school for three days. Ramudu is asked to assume the half-squat position outside the classroom. But compared to the suffering of the past three days, the physical punishment doesn't matter to him.

Just before the second bell, Lakshman Rao wants to know if the students have brought in filled-in application forms. Many shake their heads in the negative.

'What? You haven't brought the forms even today? There are only three days left now. You should bring them back fast, before it is too late.' Lakshman Rao walks out with his attendance register.

Ramudu, sitting in the half-squat position outside the class, quickly stands up, takes out the form and runs after Lakshman Rao, 'Saar, saar.'

Turning back, Lakshman Rao finds Ramudu with the form in his hand, 'Saar, here is the form, Saar.'

'Why didn't you give it when I asked in class?' Lakshman Rao enquires.

'You had made me squat in punishment, Saar, so I could not move.'

Lakshman Rao smiles, presses his shoulder gently, smiles at him encouragingly and leaves. Ramudu's eyes brighten up at the teacher's smile. He proudly looks at the shoulder that the teacher has pressed. He dreamily gazes into a future where he can also sign like saars like Lakshman Rao. His gaze, however, is fixed on the sweetly squawking parrot on the tree.

M.M. Vinodini

Born in 1969, this spirited young woman comes into prominence as a writer against the backdrop of the feminist intervention in Telugu literature that is associated with the 1993 publication of the path-breaking collection *Neelimeghalu*. 'I was there when the poet Sikhamani received a copy in the post. He opened the package, quickly looked through the book and handed it over to me. I had a reputation as one who read poetry. Feminist poetry, realism, form, diction, modernity and so on were topics of everyday discussion in Telugu University. Around the time I was doing my MA (1992–94), the most powerful poetry was coming out of the feminist movement. In fact, I always thought of feminism more as a literary movement than as a social one,' she says, and adds: 'I embraced feminism. But today I have a complaint. Feminist theory is too Western. It made me overlook the fact that there was a problem worse than patriarchy: caste.'

Vinodini grew up in a family of five children—three sisters and two brothers. Her grandfather, M. Joseph, was a mala convert to Christianity. They lived in an area called Churchpeta in Guntur. Even in the church there was discrimination, but it did make education accessible to his children. Her mother's family worked as cleaners (thoti) and ayahs in the Guntur General Hospital. Her father was a schoolteacher and had a reputation as a scholar and a good speaker, but, largely owing to his drinking, the family was always much poorer than others around them—who were also first-generation-educated teachers and small officials. 'We did not have the social status that a teacher's family generally has. There were no chairs, no beds in the house; we were always struggling to make ends meet. Mother used to go out, collect cow dung and make it into cakes that she sold; both she and my sister—and I too—used to be called to do small jobs for our neighbours: carry water from the community tap, wash the utensils. Often people would assume that because we were poor, they could just ask us to work; they rarely paid for it. It was as if our poverty made us available. I never had a uniform and would often get a thrashing from the teachers in school because I was poorly dressed.'

Until she was nine, Vinodini studied in the local school in Guntur, moving after that to Narasaraopet where she joined Sarada Niketan. 'It was a girls' school and I was put in Class 5B. The teacher walked into the class and asked my name.

'"Mary Vinodini," I replied.

‘“Kirastani?” she inquired, and I nodded. Suddenly I felt the others shrink back from me.

‘The next teacher sported a long red mark on his forehead. He saw that the class was disturbed and asked what happened.

‘The girls told him and said, “We will be defiled if she is in the class.” He asked me to read. I could have easily done so, but somehow the words did not come out of my mouth.

‘“Wah! Wah!” he said mockingly, and then asked: “What is your name?”

‘“Mary Vinodini,” I replied.

‘“Mary Vinodini? What sort of name is that? Is Pentamma and so on not good enough for you? Wear a bindi and come to the class,” he said sarcastically.

‘I ran out, leaving my books behind and refused to go back. I have had several bad experiences like this.’

Another early memory is of a brahmin friend of her father’s. He was a travelling salesman and would stay with them when he was in town. Before he arrived, Vinodini’s mother would wash the house down and make sure everything was spotless. ‘He was a chain smoker and would leave the house stinking of tobacco. Once he lit his cigarette from the candle my mother had placed before the picture of Jesus.’

The family did not have a political tradition and though Vinodini was active in school and college, she does not lay claim to the Left lineage that many other Telugu dalit writers have. However, the killings at Karamchedu took place when she was studying for her intermediate. ‘I heard the news, but did not fully comprehend it. I did not know about people’s movements; there was no leftist atmosphere in our house. Our family was too small, too low; the neighbourhood of twenty or so families that we lived in was a sort of closed-off unit. I had not even heard the word “discrimination”, though I had experienced it—my name, the fact that I did not wear a bottu on my forehead, was enough. Katti Padma Rao was working in the Guntur/ Narasaraopet area. We used to listen to cassettes of his speeches and thought he was a great man.’ When she was studying for her intermediate, Vinodini wrote her first story. She says, ‘It was a story written under the influence of reading the mainstream *Andhra Jyothi* and *Andhra Prabha* weekly magazines.’ She wrote her first poem on unemployment.

After completing her MA in 1994, Vinodini taught for two years in Guntur’s famous ‘cram’ colleges. These coaching institutions prepare students for various professional entrance examinations. ‘For teaching one hour a day right through the month, we used to get paid 100 or 125 rupees. I worked from morning to night to take home 1,500 a month,’ Vinodini recalls. Also in 1994, Vinodini met fellow poet Khaja, a dudekula Muslim, whom she married in 1999. ‘We married under the Special Marriage Act. I

wanted a legal relationship.' Vinodini and Khaja were part of a group of dalit and OBC writers (others in the group were Madduri Nagesh Babu and Pydi Theresh Babu) who challenged the Telugu literary establishment in the 1990s.

Vinodini's first important story was published in *Nallapoddu*, a collection of dalit women's writing brought out by Gogu Shyamala. Feminist questions take on a totally different colour in the dalit context, Vinodini points out. 'The issues here are not of attraction, desire and so on, but of hate, of being detested, spat upon. Remember what happened to Bhanwari Devi in Rajasthan? What does it mean, when a person is raped by a man, his son, his son-in-law at the same time? Is the object of this violence simply a woman? What is she? Chalam's Rajeswari is a brahmin girl. [Rajeswari is the protagonist of the novel, *Maidanam* by the well-known Telugu writer Chalam.[1]] I feel I don't really know her. We did not experience her rage and lust. In the context of our lives, the cold war between husband and wife that feminism talks about seems so thin, so empty. My complaint about *Neelimeghalu* is that it made me forget all this,' she observes.

In 2009, she wrote an article in the *Andhra Jyothi* daily saying that feminists had to reject manuvadam (brahminical ideology) if feminism was to speak to the times. Her M.Phil thesis was written on *Neelimeghalu.* She worked on 'Feminist Poetry in Telugu Literature' for her Ph.D. Her stories are published in collections such as *Katha* (2009) and *Katha Varshika* (2010) and other literary magazines. She is currently assistant professor at Yogi Vemana University, Kadapa.

The story translated below is 'Tappipoina Kumarte (Luke 15; 11–32)'.

The Parable of the Lost Daughter: Luke 15: 11–32[2]

Translated by Uma Bhrugubanda

'Didn't you say they were brahmins! Will they let us into their home, dear?'

'I don't know about you … but they will certainly let *me* come in,' said Suvarthavani, smiling as she parted her hair looking into the mirror.

Those were soft baby feet that kicked him on the chest, but they really hurt all the same. But Paladasu collected himself thinking—

It was true; he didn't even have proper clothes to wear. Carpentry in the day and plying the rickshaw at night till the second shows of cinema were over meant that he was dirty and unkempt all the time. His feet were always covered in dust—in fact, he

had not known footwear since the time he was born. But his daughter—no one would believe that she was his girl—she was so pretty!

He continued, 'Listen dear, you know this, I mean, we are lower caste …'

'Father, they are not at all like that. They don't care about caste or religion. My friend's father has written many books saying that all human beings are equal. I have been to their house several times when I was in Rajahmundry. I moved freely in the entire house. My friend even took me into their kitchen.'

'Oh! In that case, you can go. Set out now and keep safe,' he said.

'Where the hell are you? Why don't you say something,' he yelled for his wife as he hauled the suitcase onto his shoulder. 'I will go to the railway station to help our daughter catch the train. If Devasahayam comes, ask him to wait for me,' and then turning to his daughter, said, 'Let's go now.'

'Oh Father! Let that be. Put that suitcase down. Why should you come all the way to the station? Call another rickshaw. I will go myself.'

'No. How will you carry all this weight, dear? Let me come with you.'

'No! Listen to me, there's no need. Didn't you say you had some work … and you said uncle Devasahayam was coming too?'

Paladasu knew his daughter wasn't going to let him come to the station. He went out to fetch another rickshaw.

Krupamma closed the steel tiffin box and wiped it with her sari. 'Egg curry, dear,' she said. 'Today is Thursday, so I bought meat. But it's no use! I know you won't eat it!' She put the box in a polythene bag and handed it to her daughter.

'Ma, it doesn't agree with me any more. Why else won't I eat it?'

Zachariah was taking out the steaming hot thigh bone from the stove. He put it in a vessel and sat himself down before the stone mortar. He said, 'You ate it for more than twenty years! Why won't it agree with you now? You're just putting on airs. You stopped eating not because you don't like it any more, but just so that you can tell your friends that you don't eat beef.' Zachariah was Suvarthavani's younger brother. He was named Zachariah because he was short just like the Zachariah in the Bible.

He gripped the hot bone, which was the size of his forearm, firmly in his palm. He beat it hard against the mortar, quickly picked up the juicy marrow that slipped out and put it into his mouth. Savouring it slowly, he turned to his sister and said, 'Come Sunday and you would start pestering Mother, "Mother, please get liver, also get blood. Don't come back without the thigh bone. And Ma, cook it with gongura." You would hardly wait for the curry to be cooked, the vessel would still be on the stove and you'd be picking out the pieces and eating them up. But now just because you're into higher

studies, you stopped eating.' He continued teasingly, 'I know that even now your mouth waters for this.'

'Yes, I stopped eating so that you can eat your fill,' she spat out the words angrily. But it was not simply anger; she was in fact irked that her brother had brought this up for discussion.

'Don't pay attention to him, dear. And write to us as soon as you reach,' her mother said, as if she was a small girl. Actually, her mother wanted to stroke her daughter's back as she said this, but the deep dark lines that had formed on her palms, and her finger nails filled with the ash she used to scrub vessels in different houses, stopped her from doing so.

'Okay, I will write. But look at your sari! Why have you hitched it up so high? Pull it down. How many times have I said to you, "Comb your hair as soon as you wake up …?"'

Before Suvarthavani could finish her sentence, Zachariah laughing aloud, took over and began imitating her, '… and to use some face powder, wear ironed clothes, cook on the gas stove, watch TV …'

By this time, all the marrow in the bone had oozed out. He placed the bone on the edge of the mortar, and closed one end with his palm. And on the other end, which was dark brown, he hit slowly but firmly. The bone broke into many pieces. He chewed on each piece like he would chew a piece of sugar cane and spat out the leftovers. Every now and then he threw a piece to the dog. Watching her brother infuriated Suvarthavani. 'Chi! I don't want to talk to you!' Suvarthavani went out and sat in the rickshaw that Paladasu had just fetched for her.

'Travel safely, Daughter,' Krupamma said as she pulled down the sari that she had hitched almost above her knees. Once again, she pleaded as if she was speaking to a little girl.

Suvarthavani had always occupied a special place in that house. She was intelligent and very good at her studies. She was good-looking too. Although they lived in a small village near Guntur, Krupamma and Paladasu decided that they would help her study as much as she wanted to. They wanted their daughter to have a life that was unlike theirs. They wanted her to be happy and respected, and they believed that education alone helped a person achieve these.

Suvarthavani liked Telugu literature and loved the river Godavari immensely. But it was not for these reasons that she did her MA studies in Rajahmundry; it was solely because of the good marks she scored that she was able to join college there. Suvarthavani loved her classmate Gayatri just as much as she loved literature and the Godavari. Because he wrote stories and novels, she loved Gayatri's father, Piratla

Subramaniam. And because Gayatri's mother, Kameswaramma, always looked serene and calm like the August Godavari, Suvarthavani loved her too.

When Gayatri invited her home for the first time, Suvarthavani felt a strange anxiety and excitement. She had never ever visited a brahmin home until then. In fact, she had never had brahmin friends before. She visited yanadi homes while she was in elementary school, and later, during her high school and BA years, she had visited Christian homes. She had even gone to the homes of Hindus belonging to other castes, but this was the first time that she was going to a brahmin house.

They had to walk a few paces from the bus stop to reach Gayatri's house. On the way, they passed a temple.

Gayatri paused near the temple, looked at Suvarthavani's face, and said, 'How do I take you home? Your face looks bare!'

'Just a minute,' she said, as she reached for a red Reynolds pen in her handbag.

Gayatri held her face and said, 'Don't move', as she tried to shape a red dot on Suvarthavani's forehead. The pen wasn't working. 'This isn't working well. Come here.' She led Suvarthavani into the temple. It was an Anjaneya Swamy temple. 'You aren't having your periods, are you?' she asked, looking suspiciously.

'No,' mumbled Suvarthavani.

Gayatri took the vermilion in the temple and applied it to her forehead. Suvarthavani felt lost, she was wearing a bottu for the first time in her life. She had never worn one even for fun.

'Oh! You look so beautiful! You look transformed. A bottu really enhances a woman's beauty. Your face is glowing now.'

Kameswaramma was all praise for Suvarthavani. 'Never mind her caste. She is a lovely girl. She speaks so clearly, such chaste pronunciation! Gayatri, you should learn the language from her.'

That day, everything in their house appeared to her in a haze. Even Gayatri's mother, father, brother, everyone was in a blur. Suvarthavani went to Gayatri's house again a few times. They all seemed to add an extra 'h' to every word they uttered. And without realizing it, she too would speak in the same way while she was in their house. Later, she would do many things 'unknowingly'. For example, saying 'Vani', instead of 'Suvarthavani' when asked for her name; writing 'S. Vani' when she had to write it; listening to the classical poetry that some lecturers belted out even when all her classmates had fled the class and even if she had the most splitting of headaches. Borrowing heavy and dusty Sanskrit tomes from the library that no one ever bothered to even glance at … attending locally held events of traditional classical literature and actually waiting till the very end!

Whenever she went to the canteen or the mess, she'd be very particular about 'used' plates, and spilt or leftover food on the tables, and fuss about clean hands and unclean hands. She would be more conscious and worried about these things than everyone else. Even when her friends took food from each other's tiffin boxes with their bare hands, she would look around for a spoon or ladle. She would hide details of the food they cooked and ate at home and instead describe how her mother made brinjal curry, sambhar and coconut-and-lentil chutney, like the food she had seen her friends bring for lunch. In addition to these, she had picked up other significant habits like, 'bunking church, wearing a red thread around her wrist like she had seen many Hindus do, and wearing a bottu whenever she visited Gayatri's house.'

Gayatri's sister was pregnant and there was a function arranged to celebrate this. This was another chance for Suvarthavani to visit Gayatri's house. Going there was always a pleasant and pleasurable experience for her. She felt as if she was throwing away into the rubbish heap her crude, old and worn-out footwear made with cow leather, and was slipping effortlessly into a pair of delicate and comfortable fine sandals made of leaves.

Gayatri had warned Suvarthavani a week in advance that she could come to the function only if her grandmother or Uncle Bachi did not attend. Grandma was so particular about their traditions that she was known to even wash fire in order to purify it! And Uncle Bachi was not only equally traditional but, in addition, was also interested in preparing the horoscopes of unwed young girls to examine their marriage prospects. Indeed, if Uncle Bachi were to ask her birth star and the exact time she was born at, and her zodiac sign and blah, blah, blah, what would she tell him? And if he discovered her caste in the process, Gayatri would surely be reprimanded for bringing her there. So, Suvarthavani was fervently hoping they wouldn't come, and they didn't!

Many people who saw her at the function quickly got down to matchmaking. But when they came to know about Suvarthavani's caste, they were taken aback wondering, 'Are there such lovely girls among the harijans!' On these occasions when Gayatri had to reveal her friend's caste, both she and Suvarthavani felt very uncomfortable. Gayatri would whisper the caste name furtively, as if she was uttering something unspeakable. And Suvarthavani looked guiltily at people, like a thief who had been caught in the act. On hearing the caste name, some consoled her saying, 'We thought she was a kamma or a reddy, doesn't look like a harijan girl at all!' Not only did Suvarthavani feel consoled by such remarks, she also felt proud. Her house, her neighbourhood and her own people all looked very small now! Suvarthavani took huge leaps to move as far away as she could from them to reach the other side.

Gayatri was applying turmeric to the feet of all the women assembled at the function. Suvarthavani too put out her feet for the turmeric. But Gayatri said quickly, 'I shouldn't

touch your feet, Vani. Brahmins shouldn't touch the feet of harijans.' Hurt, Suvarthavani quickly withdrew her feet. Gayatri patiently applied turmeric to all kinds of feet—feet sore from being constantly wet; feet that were coarse with cracked heels and rough skin; feet that were so dry that their skin was peeling away; feet that were dusty and dirty with toenails that were encrusted with mud—she used her delicate soft hands to rub turmeric on all of them. But she did not touch Suvarthavani's feet. But Suvarthavani was content just to be there at the gathering. But she didn't like the sight of her own pale feet amidst all those bright yellow feet. So, she took some turmeric and rubbed it on her feet herself.

The small joys and proud moments that she gathered on such occasions turned into dislike, anger and frustration whenever she went home for the holidays. She hated the fact that her own parents looked nothing like Gayatri's parents. She began to dislike the way they spoke, their habits, their work, everything annoyed her now. Sometimes, she just found it all quite despicable. She would constantly talk to them in an irritated and impatient tone. She found fault with everything they did. Soon, they got used to her behaviour.

After completing her MA, Gayatri got married and left for the United States. Her father, Piratla Subramaniam, had retired and moved to Hyderabad, built a house and settled down there. Suvarthavani was working part-time in the Ambedkar Open University and was also doing her research. She came home for the vacation. When she received a call to attend the spot valuation at the university in Hyderabad, she set out for the city.

*

'The rain is quite foolish! It's okay for it to be pouring hard in the village, why should it rain here in this big city.' Suvarthavani got off the train at Secunderabad station cursing the downpour. She gave Subramaniam's address to the auto driver and got in.

On the way, she began thinking of Gayatri's family. She knew that Gayatri's parents and her elder sister and brother-in-law, both of whom worked in Hyderabad, lived in the house together. The sister had rented one part of the house and the parents lived in the other. The auto was getting drenched in the rain as it sped along the tank bund. The road shone like a river of black tar. With her head bent slightly, Suvarthavani was watching the statues lined along the bund side. Jashuva! He stood there proud and tall with a glowing self-respect despite the showers of humiliation he had endured. All of a sudden, she remembered something. She removed the chain she was wearing around her neck and took off the pendant that was hanging from it. She wore the chain again. She opened her palm and looked at the pendant—it was a cross. Smiling, she said, 'Sorry, Jesus', and threw it into one corner of her handbag. She took out a small packet of

sticker-bottus and stuck a bottu on her forehead. Ah! She felt relieved now. The auto drove past Ambedkar standing at the end of tank bund.

It was easy enough to find the address. It was a newly constructed house. The morning air was filled with the smell of incense.

'It's for a week, Father … Starting today until the twenty-second.'

'Don't they provide accommodation there?' Subramaniam asked sharply.

'No, Father, most people are renting rooms in a lodge, four to five in one room. Even women are forced to do it. But I came here,' she said smiling. She got up to put away her coffee cup in the kitchen sink. 'Wait,' said Kameswaramma. 'We've just finished the puja for the day, so it is better if you don't enter the kitchen and the puja room.' Suvarthavani left the cup in a corner of the living room.

Suvarthavani had always wanted to cement the friendship she had with Gayatri. As part of this effort, she behaved as if Gayatri's parents and Gayatri's house were her own. She would address Gayatri's sister and bother-in-law as 'sister' and 'brother-in-law'. She would call Gayatri's parents 'mother' and 'father'. She would refer to Gayatri's house as 'our house'. When she spoke about her own family, she simply said Mother, Father or Brother. However, Gayatri always said, 'my mother', 'my father' and 'your mother' and 'your father', always specifying whom she was referring to.

Even now, Suvarthavani believed strongly that she was close enough to the family to come and stay in their house for the week although Gayatri was no longer there. Rather, she hoped that she was close enough to do so. Indeed, she also hoped in one corner of her mind that they would gift her a sari when it was time to leave, just like they did whenever close relatives visited.

She spoke to Kameswaramma affectionately and enquired about each and every one of their family members and relatives and even all their children by name. Many of them she had never even met, but she had heard of them through Gayatri. Kameswaramma didn't ask her in turn about the welfare of her family. In fact, she didn't even know anything about Suvarthavani's family, she didn't know about her parents or her siblings. Even Gayatri had never cared to ask.

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Suvarthavani had to go daily to the university in Jubilee Hills by bus and auto. In the evenings she had to visit bookshops and libraries. So it was quite late by the time she came back each day. The family usually finished their dinner by that time and left hers in a plate in her room. They had given her the small room that connected the front portion where Subramaniam and Kameswaramma lived with the rear portion of the house where Gayatri's sister lived with her husband. Suvarthavani was really pleased that

they had given her that room because it contained all the bookshelves. One half of a bookshelf consisted of books that Subramaniam himself had authored. Oppressed castes, exploited classes, the poor and the needy, lonely women, prostitutes—these were his subjects. Many of his stories and plays featured young, handsome eligible men from upper castes marrying women from such classes and castes. She read these each night before going to bed. She was very eager to discuss them at length with Subramaniam. But he always answered her in the driest of tones. He was always nagging his wife or scolding someone or the other loudly over the phone. Apart from the one or two sentences he spoke with her on the day she arrived, he did not speak to her again.

From the third day of her stay, Suvarthavani began to get very anxious. It was that time of the month—she would get her periods any day now. Should she tell them at all? If she did, should she tell Mother or Sister? Would she also have to sit separately in that small space near the bathroom without touching the rest of them, like Gayatri's sister did recently? Would she have to wash her own plate and glass and leave it there too? If she did this, the men of the house too would come to know that she was having her periods! That would be quite shameful. Maybe, she shouldn't tell any of them … maybe she should just keep it a secret. But how to dispose of the used napkin? Should she just wrap it up and put it away in her suitcase along with the used clothes? Or put it in her handbag and throw it away once she got out of the house? But if she kept this a secret, would it not amount to cheating these people? Would it not be an insult to their traditions? All this wouldn't have mattered in her house, but here … Thankfully, the day of her departure arrived, but her periods hadn't. Suvarthavani was relieved. Today was her last day here.

That evening as she walked back from the bus stop earlier than usual, she met Gayatri's brother-in-law on the way. He stopped his scooter and offered her a lift. 'Aren't you early today?' he asked.

She hesitated slightly before getting onto the vehicle. 'I didn't have any extra work today,' she replied, smiling shyly.

'Hold me tight … the roads are really bad.' He seemed to be aiming for all the ditches in the road and was repeatedly applying the brakes. Suvarthavani had been puzzled and irked by his behaviour from the very start. He acted too familiar. He would come in every morning and wish her. He would knock on the bathroom door several times while she was bathing to ask her if she was done. If she was holding their baby, he would touch her breasts lightly while taking the child from her. Sometimes he would come into her room after eleven in the night when everyone else was asleep and ask her to come watch TV with him. During the day, he always talked of tradition and puja and

so on. Gayatri had always talked about how her brother-in-law greatly respected traditions. But his behaviour belied this all the time.

'Why are you so quiet? Do you watch films?' he asked her.

'Sometimes.'

'English films?'

'I've recently started watching some.'

'Have you seen this? He pointed to a wall poster.'

It was an obscene poster depicting a man and woman who were half-naked embracing each other. She felt revolted. She also felt wounded and insulted by his gesture.

When she didn't answer, he turned back and grinned, 'Come on … Haven't you seen it?'

'No.'

'Oh, you haven't? You know we should learn to enjoy life! You are Christian. You are not a traditional girl! What's there to stop you? My wife and Gayatri … they are always talking of tradition, morality, chastity and other such nonsensical stuff. They carry such notions in their heads. They are too orthodox. We cannot change them. But you are free. You don't need to carry those burdens. You can enjoy life freely. So why should you stick to our traditions?'

'If you don't mind, let me ask you something … come, let's talk over coffee,' he said as he stopped near a cafe and led her in. She walked behind him reluctantly. She could see the half-hidden brahmin lock in his 'modern' crop of hair. He also wore a tiny vermilion dot on his forehead and many a sacred thread adorned his wrist.

He continued as he sipped a cool drink: 'Science has developed so much nowadays. You don't need to be afraid of anything. I am friendly with many Christian girls. You know what it means to be friends, right?' He winked as he said this.

'There are so many things I like about Christian girls. They wear modern clothes. They don't care whether it is a man or woman, they ride on bikes. They are willing to come along wherever you wish to go—a movie, a park, anywhere. They really know how to use their freedom. They don't hesitate to sit close to you or to shake hands. They don't propose such sentimental nonsense as marriage. And what's more, you can hug them and roll around and kiss them just as you please, there's no danger of spoiling the bottu on their foreheads!' He laughed out loudly.

Suvarthavani felt her mouth go dry. She felt as if the divider from her school geometry box was stretched straight to pierce both her palms at once. Such contempt for

her caste and her community! How could he talk so cheaply? He, who always seemed so preoccupied by pujas and traditions!

'Why are you staring at me like that? Perhaps you don't know this. In the city "the women from your community" are like this. But why speak only of the city! The village women are no less. As you know, all the men from the big houses use the women from the harijanwada. Oh! It's so thrilling to take these women in the sugar-cane fields or amidst the maize fields. But you know in the village, there is always the danger of someone getting pregnant. Whereas here, you know there have been such advances in science, we don't need to worry about such things.'

She felt as if the wounds in her palms were now bleeding slowly. She stood up abruptly and walked out of the cafe silently. He walked behind her.

She came home and went straight into the bathroom and washed her face. But she didn't feel any better. She washed her hair and her whole body with cold water. The more she thought about all the things he had said about the women from her caste and community, the more a fierce agony filled her. It was as if a sharp knife dug deep into her body and cut her open. She couldn't eat that night. She went into her room, turned off the light and lay down on the bed.

It was September and the Hyderabad cold was already severe. The damp weather had caused all the wooden doors to expand—it was hard to close any of them properly. The family was worried about a possible burglary. So, the carpenters had been called in that day. They shaved off the extra wood and fitted in new bolts and locks for all the doors. This took all day and it was nine by the time Kameswaramma checked all the doors and paid the carpenters before sending them away. Subramaniam called around ten to say that he would be home in an hour and a half.

Suvarthavani couldn't sleep. She didn't feel like reading anything either. Every word that Brother-in-law had said in the cafe echoed in her head and she felt that each of the things he said about Christian girls was aimed at her. She had such respect for their culture and traditions, but they had nothing but hatred and contempt for her caste and her people. Her head was spinning. 'They really think that we are unworthy of any regard or respect—they have such disdain for us.' And she had shared those ideas! She was so anxious to speak, dress and behave like them. She had even taken to wearing a bottu just like Hindu girls, so that she would be seen as one of them. But despite all this, to them she was still a harijan girl, a Christian girl!

She began to think of the number of times she was humiliated and insulted because of her caste. She thought of the time Gayatri placed a bottu on her forehead without even asking her. She thought of the time when Gayatri avoided rubbing turmeric on her feet alone in that large gathering of women. It didn't matter that she was her friend. She was

a harijan and therefore untouchable. Why did she ever think that their customs and their language were respectable? Why could she not respect her own language and culture?

She heard the sound of the scooter … Subramaniam must have come home. Kameswaramma opened the door for him. Suvarthavani looked at the time. It was half-past midnight. After about five minutes, she heard him shouting loudly. 'You filthy bitch! What have you been doing all day … displaying your body to those low-caste bastards? You rotten old whore, why was the bolt not fitted on the main gate? Did you sleep with those bastards that you let them off with only half the work done! You mala bitch … you madiga bitch … you act just like those low-caste bitches. You've picked up all their habits … you Christian bitch, why don't you hook up with that bastard of a carpenter … those mala madiga buggers.' He went on and on. There was no shutting him up.

Suvarthavani was shocked to hear him abuse his wife using such foul language. Abusive language was not new to her. It was common enough in her own family and in her community. But it blended seamlessly into their life and language. Those terms were used to express love, affection and intimacy. They were also used to express anger and rage. However, this kind of hatred and contempt was not common. In fact, she had never heard such repulsive and humiliating language used between two people who were bound by ties of love and marriage.

Moreover, she couldn't understand what link there was between the abuses Subramaniam hurled at Kameswaramma and her negligible error of overlooking a bolt. She hadn't ever imagined that Subramaniam could speak such language. She looked at the bookshelf and the rows of books he had written. There was nothing in common between the lofty words spoken by the protagonists of those books and the abuses that he used just now. And it was not just his wife that he abused. He had abused her too! He abused her caste, her religion, and the women of her community, and the men of her community.

Suvarthavani was not sure if it was the divider or the knife now which pierced her wildly and indiscriminately … up, down, here, there … her body was being carved into pieces. The pain from these invisible wounds began to hurt her immensely. It kept her awake all night. She remembered her home. Her heart was filled with agony. The dim haze that had eclipsed her mother and father, her brother, her house, her neighbourhood was all gone! They stood in a clear light now, waiting for her.

Finally it dawned on her. Suvarthavani woke up and bathed. It was the day of her departure. She put together all her things. She opened her purse and took out the little Jesus pendant and wore it. She left her forehead clear and bare. She threw the bottu packet into the dustbin, took her suitcase and stepped out into the living room.

The whole family was sitting there. She told them that it was the last day of work and that she was going to leave straight from the university. 'Goodbye,' said Suvarthavani

and proceeded to wear her sandals without waiting for a response.

Kameswaramma said, ‘Girl, you seem to have forgotten your bottu.’

‘No, Mother. I haven’t forgotten. I am a Christian girl. I am a dalit girl.’ She smiled and stepped out of the house as if there was nothing more to be said.

Sambaiah Gundimeda

‘Gundimeda is not a surname. It’s what my father’s village is called. I don’t have a surname. Everything I am is self-made, not something that has come down to me. Unlike the upper castes, I inherit no capital of any kind,’ Sambaiah observes. He was born in 1972 in his mother’s village, Namburu, near Guntur. ‘My mother, Kristuraju, had studied up to class seven; Father up to class two or maybe three. His name was Peddapamlu. My grandfather, Venkaiah, did the usual madiga work in the village—curing hides and working the leather, working in the fields. It was Grandfather who taught me the alphabet. Mother died nine days after my sister was born. I am told I was two at the time. My aunt looked after my sister. I shuttled between grandparents. Father remarried. I called his wife “amma”.

‘In our village of around 1,500 houses, there were two government schools, one for the malas and the madigas, and the other for the brahmins, kammas, gowdas—and the one Muslim family. Our school was located in the malapalle. It had mud walls and a thatch roof. The building collapsed in the 1977 cyclone and was not rebuilt, so the children just went over to the master’s house. The teachers—a husband and wife—were mala. The “village” school had a good, pucca building; the headmaster was a brahmin. I did not like school. I enjoyed taking the buffaloes out to graze. But the family was insistent. Grandmother even offered me ten paise a day to go to school!’ Sambaiah was sent to the ST hostel in Mangalagiri, where he studied from the third to the fifth class. Here, he says, there was actually a ‘regular timetable and teaching. The warden, a padmashali, was a good person. He got teachers from the high school to tutor the hostel kids in the evenings. Then a new kamma warden came. He wound up the tuitions, stopped the issuing of soap, stopped pocket money, cut down on food and made us clean his house. The older children would bunk class and go to the cinema, or work in hotels and bars, sell fruit or beg. I would go to the cinema with them. Father got wind of it and came across. He shouted at me in front of all the others. I felt really humiliated.

‘After class five, I ran away and began selling soda in a bus stand some thirty kilometres away. Grandmother found me and took me back. Father put me into a boarding school run by the Roman Catholics at Peddawadlapudi. They did not admit me into class six—said that I was too short—but in any case I had forgotten most of what I had learnt in class five. Maths was fearsomely difficult. The sister who taught us gave me a sum, and when I could not do it, she sent me to show it to each class from the first

class onwards and ask for help. I was really upset and began bunking her class. She complained to the headmaster, who thrashed me and then reported me to Father, who came and thrashed me some more. All this made me hate school.

'The head of the order of monks that ran the school was a kamma. He used to beat all the children—most of all the dalit boys. However, he treated the kamma and reddy boys affectionately, and gave them sweets. With us, he was always rough. There were some seven madiga boys in the boarding school. On alternate days, we were called out from class and made to work in the fields. We did not mind that too much. Class was not fun. On weekdays we cleaned the father's rooms, on Sundays we went over to the nuns and did the sweeping, mopping and cleaning of toilets for them. The girls had to wash their clothes. I resented cleaning the toilets and complained to Grandmother. "If you want to study, you have to do it," she said. I managed to get through that year somehow.

'Then Father died suddenly. He was the panchayat president and the family was centred on him. It took them years to get over it. I was in class six. All the teachers used to hit us. They would ask us to put our hands on the table and whack them with a ruler. There were always sores on our hands—sores, pus, blood. I ran away again. It was too much for my grandparents, and they gave up on me. For a year and a half, I worked in a bar and a restaurant, then in various shops. My aunt found me. She came with her baby who was just seven days old. "Come and stay with me. Do whatever you want, but don't work in a bar …" I did as she asked, but boredom caught up with me.

'One day, I just took off to Guntur—to the district collector's office. "I want to meet the collector," I said and kept waiting. At seven in the evening, the deputy collector asked why I was there. "I want to study," I said. He called up the Social Welfare Department and put me into a hostel. Back in the sixth class, I found it difficult, but I managed to stay there until the seventh class exams. The warden was dalit. He recognized my abilities and was encouraging. He used to take us to his house and feed us sometimes. The hostel was well run, but a few of us used to sneak out at night to the cinema. I was caught. Humiliated, I ran away again.'

This time, his uncle found him. The uncle had a job as a railway gangman and had six children. They lived in terrible poverty and there was often no food, but 'he took me home, saying "If you don't want to study, don't."' All too soon, Sambaiah was ready to run away again.

'In Namburu village, there was a novitiate monastery. The brothers used to gather the children, talk to us, teach us prayers. I told them I had no parents. "We are looking for a boy to work for us," they told me. I worked with them as a table boy for over two years. Then one day I told the father superior that I wanted to study. He was very happy. They sent me to Suryapet and I finished school, passing the exams with a first class. I told them I wanted to become a priest, but it was obvious that I was not very religious.

"Priesthood is not for you," they said, and sent me to Andhra Loyola College. I went to mass, helped other students, got good marks and good reports … It was 1990 and I was on my way to becoming a scholar.

'In school, I never realized what caste discrimination was. But in college it was all too evident. Friendships were caste-based; there were many caste-based conflicts between groups. Someone who had been talking to me and participating in activities with me, moved away into a mala group. I can't remember any friendships between the madigas and the kammas. If there were fights, the kammas would intervene and sort things out. They took on the role of "natural" leaders. Loyola was in a kamma-dominated area. The kamma boys had links with the rowdies who hung around outside the college. If we displeased them, the rowdies would bash us up. The students in the big women's college, Stella Maris, were also predominantly kamma. Since I was active in college and a good student, I became the class monitor. They would force me to mark them as present even when they were not. I had seen others bashed up, teeth broken … I was timid. What is more, if the monks came to know that I was involved in these fights, they would throw me out.

'This was also the period after the Chunduru massacre. Katti Padma Rao was active in the area. Catholic fathers and students supported him as did the Catholic students organized by AICUF [All India Catholic Universities Federation], who were there working with street children. Father Bosco, a dalit—who later became the superior of the Andhra Province, now at Satyodayam—played a key role. The bishops, however, were against the fathers and students taking part in dalit activities. AICUF continued, we sang carols, took part in a nativity play, but also became involved in social issues: sending girls to school, spreading awareness about AIDS, discussing the atrocities against dalits. The next year we decided to stage a play titled *Karamchedu*. We did it in the hostel and sang the song "Dalita Pululama". Over half the boys walked out of the hall.

'I wrote the entrance exams for four postgraduate courses—English, Political Science, Sociology and History. I got into all four. I was advised against English by the other students. No dalit does well in the English department, they said. So I did a degree in Political Science and took some courses in Sociology. I got a seat in the open category. In 1994, I joined Hyderabad Central University. We used to write our answers in Telugu when we did our BA, so we found it very difficult to express ourselves in English. All the same I did well in many subjects, winning a gold medal in Political Science. I planned to write the IAS prelims. I wanted to get into the IAS—that is one reason why I kept a low profile in student politics. I wrote the exam in 1998 and got through the prelims, but did not make it to the mains.'

The essay reproduced here describes the initiative taken by the students at the university to establish that dalit food was also national food and that it needed to be publicly recognized and acknowledged.

In 2002, Sambaiah was awarded the Ford Fellowship to study at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, London). 'In general, SOAS was useful, but it was tough. I could not communicate, could not follow their accent, bunked some classes. I really did not learn much from my teachers. I still found it difficult to write, but somehow managed a research proposal. When I came back to Andhra for fieldwork, I came across a booklet opposing the categorization proposals that were being made. It was the mala argument. I wrote a short essay in response, quoting Ambedkar and saying that he would definitely have supported categorization. That started me on this career of public intervention, responding to issues. I wrote both in Telugu and English, and have been well received, and so my skills of expression quickly grew.'

Democratization of the Public Sphere: The Beef Stall Case in Hyderabad's Sukoon Festival[1]

Introduction: Exiling Communities through Hegemonic Culture

The concept of hegemonic culture, critical to the present discussion about equal treatment of different cultures within Indian law and politics, has two meanings. Firstly, it refers to the culture of the dominant group in society, the group with the power to decide who belongs to this society and who does not. In such a society, as in virtually all human societies, there are cultures or subcultures that exist side by side with the hegemonic culture, but these are considered less important or are even not considered at all. Secondly, the view may be taken that there is only one culture for the whole society and that culture is decided by the dominant group.

My use of the concept here is clearly in the first sense, respecting the reality of social and cultural pluralism. In addition, equality of treatment of all citizens and their cultures in public places is one of the solemn declarations of the fundamental rights guaranteed in the Constitution of India, to the effect, ultimately, that all citizens shall be at liberty to live in accordance with their culture. The hegemony of a particular kind of 'Hindu culture' in India's public sphere, however, reflects a dichotomy between the stated constitutional declarations and social reality. The end result of such hegemony is the marginalization of non-Hindu cultures and, in that sense, it is similar to other hegemonic

cultures, but there is something more serious, and perhaps specific, to the hegemonic claims of Hindu culture. By placing the dalits, who are generally considered *outside* that very hierarchy, also the bottom of the caste hierarchy, Hindu culture not only marginalizes but also importantly rejects dalits and their culture. Two debilitating effects of such rejection are that dalits have become 'citizens in exile' (to quote Gopal Guru) in their own country and that the human agency of dalits has been 'tampered with' and injured on an everyday basis …

The present article examines how a group of students, the Dalit Students Union (DSU), faced difficulties and opposition in setting up a beef stall at a student festival in Hyderabad Central University. The article first outlines the demand for the installation of this beef stall. The aim thereafter is to analyse three interconnected aspects of the dalit students' demand: cultural representation, humiliation and retrieval of human agency, and democratization of the public sphere. Through this analysis, I make two claims. Firstly, rejection of any community's culture is a way of injuring the human agency of that community and such injury can be healed only by a dialogical process, namely the assertion of positivity and pride in their own culture by the injured and positive recognition of such assertion by the one who inflicted the injury. Secondly, for the democratization of the public sphere to be effective, it is not enough to accord representation to marginalized cultures. Such representation needs to be accompanied by respect of 'the other'.

Food Hierarchy and Caste Hierarchy: A Dialectical Matrix

Within the caste-based Hindu society, the food hierarchy goes from vegetarianism (at the top) to meat-eating (involving no beef) to beef-eating. In 'Origin of Untouchability', 1916, Ambedkar drew attention to these two taboos and the sociocultural codes they carry with them:

Even a superficial view of the food taboos of the Hindus will show that there are two taboos regarding food that serve as dividing lines. There is one taboo against meat-eating. It divides Hindus into vegetarians and flesh-eaters. There is another taboo against beef-eating. It divides Hindus into those who eat cow's flesh and those who do not.

Thus, these two food taboos divide Hindu society into three groups that broadly correspond with social divisions on caste and community lines: (i) vegetarians, specifically brahmins; (ii) non-vegetarians, i.e., meat consumers (but not beef eaters), these include various categories of non-brahmins; and (iii) beef consumers, primarily the dalits.

Interestingly, this food hierarchy is not built upon brahminical notions of caste. It is constructed on a matrix comprising the superiority of nonviolence, a conception of the graded hierarchy of living things and most importantly a belief in the sacredness of the cow. In modern India, this matrix was shaped by none other than Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu to the core. In correspondence with Asaf Ali in 1920, Gandhi wrote:

> I consider that God has not created lower forms of animal life for man to use them as he will … I have no right to destroy animal life if I can subsist healthily on vegetable life. I have no right to slaughter all animal life because I find it necessary to slaughter some animal life. Therefore, if I can live well on goats, fish and fowl (surely enough in all conscience), it is a sin for me to destroy cows for my sustenance. And it was some such argument that decided the rishis of old in regarding the cow as sacred, especially when they found that the cow was the greatest economic asset in national life. And I see nothing wrong, immoral or sinful in offering worship to an animal so serviceable as the cow … cow slaughter is indefensible on moral grounds.

In this discourse, cow slaughter and beef-eating become unnecessary and immoral acts. However, in practice, the food hierarchy is far messier, especially when it comes to what specific castes and communities actually eat and what they are supposed to eat. For instance, brahmins of all sub-castes in Bengal and saraswat brahmins in the coastal regions of Karnataka eat fish. Several communities in the middle of the caste hierarchy, such as vaisyas and lingayats, are vegetarians …

The effects of the caste Hindu discourse on beef consumption, especially upon dalits, are appalling. In everyday social relations, they are made vulnerable to humiliating treatment. Following the rise of Hindu fundamentalist forces, on several occasions, dalits have been lynched by caste Hindus, allegedly after killing a cow. Dalits are forced to consume beef stealthily, far from the gaze of the caste Hindu public. This, however, does not mean that dalits accept their subordination. They are engaged in an intellectual critique of the food hierarchy as well as symbolic acts of consumption of beef in public so as to dispel the stigma attached to it.

The Demand for a Beef Stall

Setting up the beef stall at Hyderabad Central University's Sukoon Festival was an attempt to tease out and highlight this stigmatizing treatment. Towards the end of each academic year, the University Students' Union, which represents the whole student body, organizes a three-day cultural festival called 'Sukoon'. A number of competitions are held for students, and there are quizzes, plays, debates, music and sports. In the

evenings, they relax in an open theatre, where different bands play for them. Along with the competitions, students and others open stalls selling books, clothes and food. The food served in these stalls is mostly vegetarian. Meat is also served, but it is generally confined to chicken dishes.

At the same time, other more culturally specific foods are eaten. Festivals are special occasions and on such occasions people enjoy food associated with their cultural background. As the name *Central* University suggests, students as well as teaching and non-teaching staff come from all over India and have diverse cultures and varied food habits. For instance, dalits (at least South Indian dalits) prefer beef to other varieties of food. Similarly, Muslims enjoy mutton biryani and students from an adivasi background as well as from the north-eastern states favour pork. Unmindful of this diversity, an exclusive preference for a particular variety of food, identified with a specific culture, especially on the occasion of the cultural festival, is a marker of the hegemony of a specific culture over the plural cultural terrain of the campus.

A few months before the Sukoon Festival in 2006, the Dalit Students' Union challenged this hegemony. They argued that the food in the stalls did not represent the cultural diversity of the university community and was simply another manifestation of the hegemony of the upper castes and their culture. The university, as a public institution, it was further argued, should not allow its public space to be colonized by a particular culture. Instead, it should ensure that the space is shared equally by every culture within the university community. In short, the cultural festival of the university should represent the many cultures of Indian society. As a step towards equality in representation, the DSU demanded that it should be allowed to set up a beef stall in the Sukoon Festival. It was argued that beef constitutes an important part of the food habits of dalits and is thus part and parcel of dalit culture. Besides, such food culture is equally shared by Muslims and a few others from caste Hindu cultural backgrounds. The administration, the executive body of the university, was 'irritated', to quote one of the DSU delegates, by this request and instantly denied permission for the stall on the grounds that 'consumption of beef … (on the campus) creates caste and communal tensions'.

This, as many DSU members and other students pointed out, is an absurd justification. How does beef consumption create caste and communal tensions? Beef is consumed outside the university campus as well and does not appear to create caste and communal tensions, or even tensions between the consumers and non-consumers of beef. In any case, the administration's refusal was taken by the DSU as a rejection of dalit culture. It organized protests against the decision and led an indefatigable campaign among the students. Its efforts divided students into two diametrically opposed groups, one supporting the stall and the other opposing it. Many student organizations supported

the DSU. The only organization that opposed it was the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student organization attached to the Bharatiya Janata Party.

As it happened, in 2006 the University Students' Union was under the leadership of the Marxist Student Federation of India (SFI), a key supporter of the promotion of dalit culture. Disregarding the decision of the university, the president of the students' union allowed the DSU to set up a beef stall in the festival. The opening of the stall generated great euphoria as well as despair on campus. Dalits and other supporters of the stall celebrated the occasion by shouting slogans in praise of Babasaheb Ambedkar, clapping, dancing to the energizing rhythms of the madiga dappu, congratulating each other on their triumph and relishing the taste of beef. The ABVP, however, bemoaned the installation as 'the campus's tragedy' and 'a calamity of Indian culture'. Further, it organized noisy protests against the stall and demanded that the administration should remove the stall, since 'beef-eating is against Indian culture and against the sentiments of [the] majority students'.

The administration, as if waiting for this response, hurried to the stall and demanded that the DSU close it down at once, alleging damage to 'order' on the campus. The DSU and other supporting organizations, especially the SFI and the Ambedkar Students' Union (ASU), stood firm and argued that the food habits of the dalits are different from those of the (caste) Hindus and this difference should be represented in the food served in the Sukoon Festival. The administration, both on account of the logic of the reasoning and the support rendered to the stall by a majority of the students, appeared to come to its senses. Taking cognizance of the prevailing local as well as national laws on the issue of beef consumption, it officially issued a letter of permission to the DSU for the beef stall.

The Beef Stall and Student Politics

Dalits, whose culture has often publicly been devalued, have an intrinsic interest in revaluing their culture and social standing in the public realm. To that extent, their campaign for the beef stall was justified. But why did non-dalit students (and, of course, non-consumers of beef) support the cause as well? Should their support be taken at face value, or are there underlying motives that need to be examined? I argue that, although dalits have an intrinsic interest in revaluing their culture, the driving force for the actualization of such interest within the campus comes from the power interests of different student groups. This is what propelled the non-dalits either to support or oppose the beef stall. This can be explained with a brief examination of student organizations and their politics in the university …

The key players in the beef issue are the dalits, but it is important to be aware that since 1995, the dalit movement in Andhra Pradesh has been caught up in reservations-

oriented activism. There are certain dalit castes, such as the mala and adi-andhra that, owing to their proximity to the Hindu upper castes, a history of Christian missionary and Hindu reform activities, but mostly as a result of access to governmental welfare, have acquired education, become socially and politically conscious and gained employment in modern spaces. It is this group of castes that has benefited most from the reservations for scheduled castes in the state and has become dominant among the dalits (Raju 2000; Mehra 2008). However, there are other dalit castes such as the madiga and relli, which lacked these initial advantages. These communities are too poorly equipped even to take advantage of facilities extended through the policy of reservation. This under-representation compelled the madigas in Andhra Pradesh to organize under the banner of the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti in the 1990s … This larger dalit politics influenced the dalit politics in the university and resulted in the division of dalit students along caste lines. Prior to the emergence of the MRPS, dalit and adivasi students were organized under the banner of the ASU. After that the madiga students formed their own Dandora Students Union. Initially, the organization operated as an exclusive body of madiga students, despite the fact that they, as part of the dalit group in the campus, had the same problems as other dalit students. But, in recent years, this Union has moved from its original exclusivity and has begun to respond to issues of others and this is reflected in the change of the organization's name, from the Dandora Students' Union to the Dalit Students' Union, both using the acronym DSU. But what triggered this transition? The Dalit Students' Union, apart from securing the interests of the madiga and other dalit students in the campus, is interested in power just like any other student organization. In its incipient years, DSU attempted to contest elections on its own strength, but electoral defeat drove the organization to evolve the two-pronged strategy of making alliances with other student organizations and attracting other dalit students into its fold. On the first front, it has entered into an alliance with the SFI, and on the second, it primarily targeted the non-mala dalit students, winning their confidence by taking up issues common to the entire dalit group. The issue of the beef stall in the Sukoon Festival is one such common issue.

After the departure of the madiga students, the Ambedkar Students' Union became an organization of mala students … While there has always been social rivalry between the madigas and malas, such rivalry has further intensified in recent years. In addition to these old and new rivalries, both organizations witnessed unprecedented competition against each other when the madiga students began to attract non-mala dalit students into its organizational orbit. Threatened with the prospect of losing members, the ASU forced itself into the beef issue. In a sense, if it had not supported the cause simply because it was an issue initiated and pursued by the DSU, it would have lost the support of other dalit students, who regarded this as an important common concern …

However, the beef stall would not have been installed but for the support of the SFI. The question is, why did it support the stall and how does such support fit into the 'class-based' approach preached by their mother party, the CPM? While this is a larger question, it is sufficient to mention here that in recent years the Left parties have changed their original position on caste, and are now supporting caste-based mobilizations for justice. Although the support of the SFI might be traced to this changed ideological stance, the immediate motive is electoral calculations on campus. While the leadership of the SFI is largely upper caste, especially kamma and reddy castes, the support base is constituted by students that belong to dalit, Muslim, adivasi and OBC backgrounds. Thus, the upper-caste leadership is compelled to support the caste-based cultural issues of dalits and other lower castes in order to sustain its support base. Such mutual support, undoubtedly, is benefiting both sides. For instance, between 2001 and 2006, the SFI and the DSU have entered into an electoral alliance, that has helped both to send representatives to the University Students' Union. Even then, while all important positions in the Union, particularly those of president, vice-president and general secretary, would be taken by the upper castes, the less important positions, such as cultural secretary and joint secretary would be given to dalit students. In other words, just as the traditional patron-client relations of the agrarian order have been replicated in the political order of democracy, they are also replicated in student politics today.

The support rendered to the beef stall both by the Tribal Students' Association as well as the North Eastern Students' Forum is also not without interest. These organizations wanted to set up a pork stall at the Sukoon Festival. As the consumption of pork had, along with beef, been 'banned' in the campus, they could not achieve this objective. However, they knew that once the path for the beef stall was cleared, it would open the way for their project. It is this interest that roped these two organizations into the supporting side.

The only student organization that opposed the stall is the ABVP. As an offshoot of the Bharatiya Janata Party, it draws its inspiration against the stall from that party's Hindutva ideology. Interestingly, however, the student body's campaign against the stall is not only on account of this ideology, it is also part of a competition for power. Thus, the ABVP, which is a strong contender for hold over the University Students' Union, employed the beef stall as an instrument to mobilize [upper] caste Hindus. It was observed that some students who generally do not take active interest in campus politics, suddenly joined the ABVP's campaign against the stall. Thus, the organization used the issue at hand to swell its membership. In addition, the issue had become an instrument in the competition for the organization's leadership between brahmin and OBC students. Many people told me that, in general, the brahmin students were not inclined to oppose the stall. The logic for their lack of enthusiasm was: 'If beef may be consumed outside the campus, what is wrong in consuming it inside the campus?' This

logic did not appeal to the OBC students, however, who were competing against the brahmins for leadership. They argued that if the brahmins were not interested in preserving Indian 'culture' and Indian 'values', they should step down and hand over the organization to those people who were the true upholders of that culture. The OBC arguments silenced the brahmins who joined the campaign against the stall.

Claiming the Right to Represent

Nobody was really surprised by the Parishad's stand against the beef stall. It is almost needless to say that the 'Indian culture' they were protecting was the culture of brahmins and other upper castes; a culture that includes, among other things, notions and ideas of purity–pollution, hierarchy and exclusion. In short, it was yesteryear's brahminism which today is Hindutva. The other argument of the ABVP, namely that 'beef-eating offends the sentiments of the majority of students' is absurd. If 'sentiment' is the basis of argument, dalits could equally well be arguing that *not* eating beef hurts their sentiments. If both concerned parties are fixated on the idea of sentiment, the argument will not lead anywhere since the place for sentiment is the private sphere rather than the public domain.

What is important to recognize is that the issue at stake is neither about beef-eating in a public space nor about sentiments of some students. It is primarily about the sharing of public space, a space that belongs to none, but is—and should remain—accessible to everyone. The individuals of the university community, by virtue of their membership in the university, are entitled to use its public space as long as such use does not encroach upon the rights of others. These rights are accorded to them both by the Constitution of India as citizens, as well as by the constitution of the Hyderabad Central University as its members. However, while some people are able to lay claim over this common space, others are prevented even from accessing it … The Dalit Students' Union, by setting up a beef stall in the public space of the university, was not merely challenging the domination of Hindu culture but was also opening up the public space for other marginalized communities and cultures to enter that space. In other words, the Dalit Students' Union was not only realizing citizenship rights accorded by the Constitution but importantly was also protecting the law itself from the exclusionary claims of caste Hindu culture.

Claiming Human Agency

The rejection of the beef stall, both by the ABVP and the administration (initially), is only one of many rejections that dalits are subjected to by caste Hindu society everyday. Such rejections are not only humiliating, but importantly, are also injuring their

humanity. In this case, what was being rejected was not just the stall or the consumption of beef, but the consumers themselves. This raises the issue of what it means to be humiliated and how the victims should react to this. Palshikar (2005: 5428) observes: 'To be humiliated is to be rendered inferior or deficient in some respect by others in a deliberate and destructive way. It is therefore a deeply distressing experience. It is something one cannot get over easily and those who have to face it everyday sense a constant threat to their sense of self-worth.' Margalit (1996: 109) writes that to humiliate is to treat a human being as non-human. This treatment is an injury to their very humanity. One of the ways of doing so is to consider some physical characteristics of theirs as a sign of a deficiency in their humanity. For instance, caste Hindus may regard the dalit drum (dappu) as inferior or stigmatizing, as also their food, particularly beef. One debilitating effect of such stigmatisation is to depict them as deviant from the normal way of life and, therefore, as severely flawed human beings or as subhuman.

The key question is how do the humiliated retrieve their humanity? Palshikar (2005: 5431) notes three main responses to humiliation: revenge, retribution and forgiveness. To this list, I add two more responses: restricting or avoiding those practices, and the converse, asserting them as positive and taking pride in the practices which grant licence to the humiliator to humiliate.

Before discussing these two additions, Palshikar's three responses need to be considered. First, if taking revenge against the humiliator implies reciprocating humiliation, how can this be achieved? Since dalits are humiliated on account of their beef consumption, reciprocating this would require humiliating caste Hindus on account of their food habits as well as their ways of life. Some remarks made by dalits and other lower castes against brahmins and other upper-caste Hindus suggest that this has happened. For instance, one finds Telugu expressions such as pappugaallu (lentil fellows), jandhyamgaallu or threaddugaallu (thread fellows, a reference to the sacred thread) and sinthapandugaallu (tamarind fellows—referring to the vaisya caste as well as their dark complexion). These terms are used not only by dalits, but also by other upper castes. However these 'insults' are relatively ineffective, for two reasons: firstly, lentils or the sacred thread, unlike beef, carry a positive social value on account of their consumption by the upper castes. Secondly, caste Hindus generally have enough social confidence to ignore these jibes.

In this context, it is useful to examine the observations by Chakrabarti (2005) on 'revenge'. Describing revenge as a fundamentally silly idea, Chakrabarti argues against it on three counts. Firstly, by resorting to revenge, the avenger cannot 'get even' with the original attacker. Secondly, '[t]he revenge spiral keeps continuing, turning into blood feuds, keeping old wounds fresh rather than helping them heal. Revenge always escalates violence, never puts it to rest.' Thirdly, vengeance is seen as an announcement

of moral and strategic defeat, not a display of victory or power. But what are the victims supposed to do with the haunting memories of past sufferings inflicted by others and the toxic resentment that this generates? Chakrabarti's advice is simply to 'remember' and 'resist' (pp. 31–36). Although one might not have objections, at least on moral grounds, the suggestion to remember and resist is unviable for two reasons. First, asking a victim to remember an act of violence or humiliation is a way of leaving the victim in permanent mental agony. The victim is doubly victimized, both on account of the humiliating treatment itself and on account of retaining such treatment in his/her memory. Secondly, the idea of 'resistance' implies continuation of the problem. The solution to a problem is annihilation rather than temporary solace. By resisting, one is at best pushing the problem aside, rather than eliminating it on a permanent basis.

I suggest that retribution as a response to humiliation is problematic for three reasons. Firstly, violence, causing destruction either human or material, is a regression of civilization. Secondly, though the population size of each individual caste is no greater than any other individual caste within the social hierarchy of India, there is a massive gap when castes join into larger social categories. The combined population strength of the caste Hindus is between 65 to 70 per cent of the total population of India, while the combined strength of the dalit population is between 22 and 24 per cent. But it is not just a question of numbers. Caste Hindus are better equipped in other ways too and in the event of violent retaliation, dalits would obviously suffer more than others. Thirdly, resorting to violence suggests that parties involved in violence have lost trust and faith in each other.

Palshikar notes that forgiveness commonly requires a change of heart and requires that the victimizer repent his wrongdoing. I remain sceptical about forgiving as a response in a caste-based society. One of the pillars of Hindu caste society is the theory of karma, which suggests that the birth of individuals into various castes in the hierarchy occurs on account of their deeds in their previous life. This means that the present positions of upper caste and lower caste are a consequence of their earlier good deeds or bad deeds. It is possible that, shaped by karma theory, caste Hindus believe that their attitude and behaviour, including violence and humiliation against dalits, is not only a way of reaping the benefits of their good deeds in previous lives, but also a way of punishing dalits for their bad deeds in the past. Shaped in such an ideological environment, the question arises whether caste Hindus can ever repent the violence or humiliation they inflict on dalits.

Ambedkar, despite his anger against caste Hindus for the indignities they inflict on dalits, gave considerable thought to the influence of scriptures on the attitudes and behaviour of caste Hindus towards dalits. He (1989 [1936]: 66) perceptively observed:

> Caste may be bad. Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man. All the same, it must be recognized that the Hindus observe Caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed. They observe Caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing Caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of Caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy you must grapple with is not the people who observe Caste, but the Shastras which teach them this religion of caste.

Such a view is simply dangerous. It removes 'human responsibility' and transposes that responsibility onto non-human materials such as religious texts, ideologies, values and faiths that cannot be held accountable. Caste Hindus will never change their attitude towards dalits without being confronted with the issue of human responsibility. As long as people choose to declare other humans as non-human for whatever reason, one cannot expect forgiveness from 'the other'.

The two responses that I earlier suggested as additional to those discussed in the scholarly literature—namely, to avoid those practices at the root of the humiliating treatment, or to affirm those practices as positive and take pride in them, need to be examined now. If one were to choose the response of avoiding the practices that are at the root of the humiliating treatment, the only available choice for dalits would be to completely give up the consumption of beef. This option presumes that people are willing to sacrifice anything in order not to suffer humiliation. Such a presumption, however, cannot be made for two reasons. While it is true that dalits are humiliated on account of beef consumption, relinquishing this practice will not, by itself, guarantee them human treatment. We have several instances on record where dalits have continued to be humiliated by caste Hindus despite strict adherence to vegetarian food. Giving up beef to avoid humiliation can itself constitute an act of humiliation, not inflicted by others, but self-inflicted. Taking an action that goes against one's interest and strengthens the power of others over one is damaging to one's self-respect and is a self-inflicted humiliation.

The second course of action, positively affirming the practices denigrated by others and taking pride in them, appears to be the best course of action for two reasons. Firstly, it shows that the practitioners value this practice. Secondly, although dalits are not ashamed of beef-eating and in fact relish its taste, they are made to feel ashamed of their food when they encounter caste Hindus, whose social norms prohibit beef consumption. The installation of the beef stall in a public space by the Dalit Students' Union can be interpreted not only as an assertion of positivity and pride in their food practice, but also an invitation for caste Hindus to taste this food and re-evaluate their perception of it. In this case, the victims are not acting on the wishes of the humiliator, but on their

own terms and thus claim agency for themselves, inviting others to accept, or at least reassess, the value of the denigrated action.

Democratization of the Public Sphere

The DSU's installation of a beef stall in a public space was an act of democratization of that space. It challenged the hegemony of Hindu culture over this public space and liberated that space from the thrall of Hindu culture. Secondly, on account of this, the space is now set for 'due representation' of all hitherto marginalized as well as misrecognized cultures. Already, students belonging to the Tribal Students' Association and the North Eastern Students' Forum are engaged in discussions about setting up a pork stall in Sukoon 2009.

A troubling question at this stage remains whether securing representation can by itself be characterized as democratization. The reason for asking this question is that the initial experience of the beef stall indicates that the DSU's approach is not so different from that of the representatives of Hindu culture. During the Sukoon festivals of 2006 and 2007, the stall mostly served beef items. As a result, the people eating at the stall were mostly dalits. Representatives of supporting student organizations also visited the stall, but only to show solidarity with the cause, mostly out of political compulsions and self-interest. This suggests that by serving a specific variety of food, the stall catered only to a specific group of consumers. This implies that the representative space of a specific culture becomes an exclusive domain of that culture and indicates, on account of this, that others are excluded from that domain. I argue that such approach is problematic for three reasons.

Firstly, the need for representation occurred because, either in the name of caste or community, people were impeded from promoting their culture in public spaces. To that extent, claiming representation in the name of the same markers was justified. However, once such representation has been secured, it is necessary to abandon the exclusivity and not cling on to it. Sticking to socially ascribed markers not only essentializes and hardens identities but also generates radical exclusion of other people and cultures. Such essentialization will negatively affect not only the socially powerful but also the powerless. As already discussed, brahmin identity entails sociocultural superiority and individuals might desire to hold on to that identity to tap into entitlements that accompany it. The same is true about the identities of caste Hindus. But the preference for the traditional ascribed identity, beyond the winning of representational space, does not work for madigas and other dalits. Further, these preferences—in the longer run—will perpetuate the system that produces and reproduces brahmins and madigas, the representatives in the caste hierarchy of the oppressor/humiliator and oppressed/humiliated. It could be argued that sooner or later it should be the aim of all

individuals to liberate themselves by breaking such prisons of identities, rather than remaining in those dungeons.

Secondly, if until 2006 the entire orbit of public space at Hyderabad Central University remained an exclusive domain of Hindu culture, now a specific portion of that space has become and will remain an exclusive domain of dalit culture, so also of Muslim culture, Christian culture, Adivasi culture, and so on. Such ghettoization cannot be liberation; at best it is jingoism. What is more, it is not just one culture's jingoism, but multiple cultures' multi-jingoisms, such that every culture henceforth will compete against every other in preaching their respective jingoisms. There may be people who argue that the 'jingoisms' of hitherto marginalized and misrecognized cultures should be distinguished from the hegemonic culture, since the former is liberating and the latter is suppressing. One would not deny this. Yet, one should be willing to see beyond the surface and be sensitive enough to recognize that such liberation or cultural particularity encourages a deepening of divisions and would undermine what Bhargava (2002: 94) calls 'the common foundation necessary for a viable society'.

Thirdly, it is true that individuals benefit by being members of a particular community's culture. Such individuals can tap into and build themselves up on resources that are at the disposal of that specific community. But it is equally true that those individuals who do not adhere to the community's culture, its way of thinking and acting, may be forced into silence. In short, cultural particularity bestows enormous power on the community at the cost of individual freedom and renders problematic the relationship between culture and subculture. Finally, the whole idea behind introducing an element of marginalized and misrecognized culture into the public space is not only to expose the stigma attached to that element, but importantly to share its culture with others. It should become a way of giving up 'ownership' of that element and sharing it with the demos.

Faced with such predicaments, how does one actualize the democratization of the public sphere? Developments at the beef stall in Sukoon 2008 provide an answer. Interestingly, for this year's Sukoon, the DSU's stall featured non-beef items also, such as vegetable biryani and chicken biryani. These changes in the menu dramatically altered the atmosphere of the stall. If earlier it attracted only students of certain communities and sympathizers of the cause, this time the stall drew students from all cultural backgrounds to eat together. A caste Hindu ate vegetable biryani while sitting along with a dalit who was eating beef biryani. This demonstrates that the DSU has repositioned itself as an accommodator of other cultures. This is an act that implies respect for one's own culture, but importantly, also respect for other cultures. This is where democratization of the public sphere is being actualized, so that representation is accompanied by respect. To put it differently, securing representation in the public

sphere is only a formal realization of democracy, not its actualization. That happens only when there is evidence of mutual respect among members for each other's cultures …

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Vemula Yellaiah

‘When I was five years old, I was already working as a jeetagadu [farm labourer bonded to a landlord family]. The household to which I was “attached”, that of Koduru Narsamma, was a madiga one. Around that time, Baindla Eshwaramma came to stay in our village along with her two daughters. She had been wronged in life. She found a job as a sweeper in the village school and lived in the house of one of the madiga elders. She could read *Pedda Bala Siksha*, a basic encyclopaedia in Telugu used as a primary school textbook. Many farm labourers used to go to her house at night to learn how to read and write. I learnt my first letters from her,’ says Vemula Yellaiah, recollecting the story of how he moved out of bonded labour and acquired an education.

Yellaiah’s education began with watching Oggukatha[1] in the villages. ‘People from the baindla caste move from village to village, telling stories about Yellamma, Pochamma and others. Eshwaramma used to take all of us children to different villages during the festival season to watch these performances. I would go along, not only to watch but also to eat the tasty yellow-coloured rice that would be served there. People used to speak of Eshwaramma as a prostitute. In any case, it was generally believed that she lived like that.’ Noticing Yellaiah’s interest in, and ability with, his studies, Eshwaramma advised Yellaiah’s father to pull him out of farm labour and send him to school. She played a key role in Yellaiah getting an education.

Yellaiah was born in 1973 in Lingalaghanapuram, Janagam taluka, Warangal district. His father, Vemula Butchaiah used to stitch chappals and also work as a jeetagadu, while his mother Chengamma was a wage labourer. Yellaiah was the youngest of three brothers and one sister.

Yellaiah’s brother, Mallaiah, had a job as a gangman in the railways. Yellaiah remembers that once he was sent to Nellore after a major train accident to move the bodies of the dead. When his brother was away, Yellaiah, who was in class two at the time, was withdrawn from school and sent back to the farm to work.[2] He was attached to the farm of Andamma Patel, the wife of Guttireddy Papi Reddy. When Mallaiah returned from Nellore, he saw Yellaiah grazing the cattle. He sold his wife’s gold chain immediately and repaid the loan to the patel. Then he sent Yellaiah back to school. Since he was older than the other children, he was put into third class and later moved to class five. He studied up to seventh class in the village’s Zilla Parishad High School.

Then his brother Mallaiah was transferred to Nalgonda district, and Yellaiah moved with him. The Nalgonda and Warangal areas were alive with strong political movements at that time. He joined class eight in the Government High School, Nagaram. This village was a stronghold of the People's War. Naxalite cultural teams used to visit the villages. They came regularly to madiga houses. Yellaiah did not understand why they came, but he was attracted by their songs. He moved to Nalgonda town to complete high school. He studied for his PDC (pre-degree course, equivalent to pre-university course or intermediate) and his Bachelor of Oriental Languages degree in Geeta Vidyan Andhrakalasala (commonly referred to as Oriental College) in Nalgonda. Later, he obtained the Telugu Pandit degree [a teacher-training certification] from Andhra Saraswata Parishat. During these years, Yellaiah read a great deal of Telugu classical literature. He persuaded his writer friends Sky Baba and Pagadala Nagendar to join the course, which they did, though Sky Baba left midway and set up a bookshop.

Yellaiah was one of the key figures in establishing Neelagiri Sahiti, a literary forum in 1993—the others being Sunkireddy Narayana Reddy and Pagadala Nagendar. *Bahuvachanam* (The Prose of Plurality), a collection of new dalit poetry that was brought out in 1996, was a product of this forum. Five of Yellaiah's poems are included in the collection. This was a period in which he mostly wrote poetry.

As a result of differences with Sunkireddy Narayana Reddy and others, Yellaiah and his friends, M. Venkat, Chitta Prasad, Durga Prasad, Manna Yadagiri and Kommu Sudhakar, formed the Gosangi Neeli Sahiti. The group published two collections of poetry, *Mogi* (Tender Fruit) and *Meme* (It's Us). Yellaiah's poems figured in both collections. Meetings were conducted every month and a vigorous debate on dalit literature continued in these small forums. Yellaiah took an active part in the Kodada Sahitya Sadassu (1995), which was organized on the theme of dalit literature. He was also a contributor to the second collection of dalit poetry brought out by G. Lakshmi Narasaiah, *Padunekkina Pata.* However, he is critical of the foreword to the book which proposes that the ideology of dalit poetry should be understood as indigenous Marxism ('Deseeya Marxism'). He has written poems on all recent chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh and also on the LTTE leader, Prabhakaran.

After 1995, Yellaiah became actively involved in Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti campaigns and activities. It was during this phase that he wrote the novel *Kakka*, which was published in 2000. Reviewing the novel shortly after it was published, Kalekuri Prasad wrote in *Vaarta*, 'The language and life of *Kakka* make us proud to be Telugus … Yellaiah stands in the madiga part of the village and brings alive its people, their relationships, the panchayat, politics in such locations, its culture and economic life … demolishing all intellectual clichés about the village and village life … [T]his is a life without embellishments, and characters with no halo. Many readers will find this

difficult to accept; but Yellaiah has demonstrated that reading also is a creative act … Yellaiah admirably performs the roles of both creative writer and historian.'

Yellaiah himself has this to say: 'I wrote this novel to portray the madigas of Telangana in relation to all castes in the village. How is madiga labour and madiga skill and knowledge used? Why should we madigas write in the language of others ["standard" Telugu] when the others do not write in our language? What we are speaking now is not my language. I know this language well, but I have decided not to use it in my writing any more. Initially, I used to write in standard Telugu and then rewrite the piece in my Telangana language, now I do not need to do that.'

Readers and critics have said that it is 'difficult' to read the novel, but Yellaiah argues that the difficulty of reading the novel is not because of the language used—though it may appear to be so. 'It is more because of the culture. Language differs from region to region, and can be understood with a little effort. Non-dalits have no real sense of, or feel for, the events, relationships, institutions, locations, culture, or milieu of dalit communities; inevitably, these aspects, which form the core of dalit experience, seem strange and alien to such people.'

Writing about the task of translating *Siddi*, Gogu Shyamala and R. Srivatsan have this to say: 'What guided us in our efforts in the translation of the piece was a sense that, for an effective translation of a text that uses language as imaginatively as this one, we had to use the best English we were capable of. That is, rather than argue that the Telangana dialect is a poor subset of Telugu that must be dealt with through the use of some crippled English, we argue that the use of the Telangana dialect is an effort that bursts with energy, and is something that has to be dealt with a great deal of respect and with the best resources available. In other words, we had to "provincialize English" to deal with the energy of this writing that has been judged by some as obscure and deeply problematic because of its somewhat "illiterate" regionalism. So, retaining a flavour of the writing through a literalism of phrase, we tried to capture the force of the writing by reproducing something like it in English.' Unfortunately (and Yellaiah is bitter about this), this novel has not received the attention it so richly deserves.

Another literary forum with which Yellaiah was associated, Gumpu Sahiti Samstha, was set up in 2001. Its members included malas, madigas and others. They conducted a monthly discussion on Ambedkar's writings as well as on new books that had come out, such as the controversial Rani Sivasankara Sarma's *Last Brahmin* (2002), which idealizes the brahmin lineage and the Vedic tradition. The first part of his second novel, *Siddi*, from which we have excerpted for translation here, was published by the Gumpu Sahiti Samstha in 2005. Yellaiah says: 'I wanted to create madiga women as the main characters. That is why I wrote *Siddi*. I depicted the domination of the madiga male

over the madiga woman. I drew on the experiences of my mother and grandmother when I wrote this novel.'

Turning to the question of dalit cultures, Yellaiah says: 'Ambedkar did not really appreciate the importance of the cultural heritage of dalits. For instance, in the *Jambapuranam* [a well-known madiga-origin epic performed or narrated with long, detailed, scrolled illustrations by the chindu and the dakkali], there is a discussion about administration. Ambedkar does not seem interested in such things. Maybe Ambedkar would have written a very different Constitution if he had read the dalit caste puranas.' Yellaiah himself has read the dakkali *Jambapuranam* and the chindu *Jambapuranam* alongside the Ambedkar volumes and the Constitution.

He, like other dalit writers and artists, has been exercised about the way madiga art has been appropriated as a generalized 'janapada' or folk art. 'Similarly, the ML [Marxist–Leninist] parties never took an interest in writing or literature from the downtrodden castes. That is the reason why dalit writers began thinking of revolutionary writers as their enemies,' he says. 'Our exit from the Left was the beginning of the dalit movement and dalit writing.'

Yellaiah has written the two novels, *Kakka* and *Siddi*, one collection of poetry, *Mulki* (2011), and nine short stories. He edited, along with Sky Baba, a special double issue of Muslim Sahityam, 'Mulki: Koluvula Dastar' (December 2003 and May 2004). He has also completed work on a sequel to *Siddi* and plans to write a play and his autobiography. *Kakka* was selected for the Telugu University Award in 2009. The award was announced when Yellaiah was busy publishing an edited collection, *Madiga Poddu*, in memory of Surender Madiga, who had committed suicide in the context of protest for categorization. Given the backdrop of terrible events that were taking place at the time, he rejected this official award. *Kakka* is being translated into English as this book goes to press in 2013. For a living, Vemula Yellaiah works as ancillary labour (lifting sacks of grain) in the Food Corporation of India godowns in Nalgonda. He is also currently pursuing a Ph.D in Telugu Literature from Osmania University.

Siddi

Translated by Gogu Shyamala and R. Srivatsan

[…]

Pissing bell! In the shit yard behind the school compound, two children pee and jabber. One, without a grain of rice in his cavernous stomach, faces time and the prospect of education. A jug of water in his belly, he looks at the sun that is not yet at its zenith. Then the mischievous boys, hair dropping over the brow and eyes off to one side, whirl and dribble their piss in circles on the parched earth.

It is known that this is urine on dry ground. As if this were rain after a seven-year drought, making puddles of dirty water, changing the colour of the soil, foaming up in waves. Would one full plate of rice be enough for a home to survive? As if on a dark and dismal landscape, dry sand squeezed in a fist flowing out from under the little finger became a handful of earthworms flung on the cracked terrain producing rice and a way to live. Boundaries give a proper form to this field, and agriculture begins.

Frogs croaking in the water. A din. Tadpoles slide, as if down the well wall, off their mother's backs. As the mother springs ahead, they seek her out and wriggle in her wake. The lake, that mother of all of life's variety, knows no pain. Water gurgling at the dam in one corner, over stones that glisten wetly like a toothy grin playing between lips, fills memory.

'Komarelli, come here, look at how far I can piss. Do you see? I will pee beyond the wall there, as my father would say. If I don't, I will give up my caste—okay? Hey, look at my underwear—have you any idea how many have I worn since I was born? My mother's mother stitched it for me. My uncle went through a difficult time, and they crushed a dried coconut over his head to keep evil spirits away. She stitched this underwear as part of their gift of blouses and shirts to my mother and my family then. See how strong this cloth is? It doesn't tear even if I tug at it. This is my grandmother's strength! Now I am pissing—look. I swear on my mother, if that's not enough, I swear on my forefathers! Isn't that enough? What promise will be enough for you? How can you not believe a promise? Tell me, ra? … All right, will you serve as my bondsman if you survive this match?'

'That is not possible! I'm a kuruma, aren't I? What do you have that will keep me labouring?'

'I will become your bonded servant; will you believe me then?'

'If I lose, I will give you my wife, Madiga Saiduga!'

'Will you really? What if you don't? Remember this. This is your word—you must give her to me. Promise me. Put your hand on mine and swear on Maisamma. This is your word, so don't back off. Put this math book on your head and promise me.'

'Look my fellow, I will hold a cane leaf and promise on the aloe, on Mother Earth!'

'Komarelli, remember that time, when we went to the city to compete in the games? We hoisted the village flag over our heads. Remember, at that time, there was someone

else in front of us. Tell me now about that incident, you useless fellow! How long has it been since we have come out here now? The interval is over! Tell me quickly.'

'What is there to tell? We made so many promises; we spoke about our honour. What else is there, Saiduga? Come on now, the maths teacher will come—do you know who he is? Bal Reddy saar.'

'What did you say? When we were holding up the flag, do you remember who was in the row in front of us?'

'Wait, I'm just digging up that memory—this incident occurred three years ago! Who was that? Yadamma? No, she is now in the class six. It wasn't Narsamma either; she was in the back row. My memory is like a steel trap—unyielding. Yes! Now I do remember! It was Urmila, the eldest daughter of the patel headman. Saiduga, you mad son of a bitch! You still think of her, don't you? Do you have any brains? What kind of fight are you picking? An impossible fight with elephants; lost before it begins. Do you think her caste is an ordinary one? What are we, and what is our strength? We are so far away that even a slipper flung by them won't fall in our pot! It is three years; it didn't happen then, is it possible today?'

'Komarelli, didn't you yourself call the karanam's daughter your wife? You too did say some things to her, didn't you?' and then, 'The patel's granddaughter will come now, you useless fellow. The interval is over. Let us go. If we don't make way for her, we will have a thorny stick shoved up our arses. No need to pee now, no need for a wife either! My bladder is still not empty and the interval is over … Now we have the perfect maths teacher—Bal Reddy saar, and after him Rahman saar.'

'Let us go now. But we came running from class and the bladder is stirring still, isn't it, Saiduga?'

'Komarelli, look there, the gateman Ghousemian is coming! Our backs are about to be broken! He is coming as if his slippers will slide off his feet! Ghousemian is coming!'

'Ghousemian, when my father slaughters an ox, I will give you the intestines, big and small, also the heart and liver, stomach, kidneys and testicles. Now will you please open the gate?' called Saidugadu.

'I too will give you a blanket made of lamb fleece! I will give you a sheep ready for slaughter. Ghousemian just open the gate a crack, we will slip in! Please Ghousemian, listen to us, open it!' cried Komarelli.

Ghousemian came up and growled, 'Ey, you fellows, where have you been so long, tell me? Take an oath on Allah and tell me—then it is up to Bhagwan to save you!'

'Ghousemian, I will ask my father and give you all the delicacies from the slaughtered ox, open the gate please'.

‘Thoo! A cock in your carcass! Will we eat non-halal meat, boy? Offer it to your headmaster. Why should I learn to beg? Get lost. Will I eat it if you give it to me? Madiga carcass meat.’

‘Ghousemian, we have goats and sheep. Will you not eat these too?’

‘Do you eat halal meat? Don’t tell me tales. Do you see, over there, Bal Reddy saar is looking out of the window. He has got up from his chair. He is walking here with giant strides. See how fast he walks.’

‘Chowkidar! Chatting at the gate are you? Come here!’ Bal Reddy commanded, coming up. ‘I will take care of those paddy-combing bastards.’

‘Did you see, boys, how he shouts? He is abusing me? What did you say you would give me? Give him all those delicacies. Or will he take those off your living bodies? He will strip those delicacies off your backs without halal; see for yourselves,’ said Ghousemian.

The bell rang thrice, end of grace. Their heart sank and mouths froze dry.

‘Saiduga, you aren’t saying a word? Saar is coming! He is going to beat us to death! Sunday two weeks ago, when our cattle were caught grazing in his fields, his father hitched up his dhoti, and threw me onto the thorn fence to beat me up, didn’t he? By god, this fellow is coming at us the same way, Saiduga, let’s run. No need for this school, we can take care of our lambs for a livelihood!’

‘Komarelli, shall we run? Tell me the truth, what do you think? Our books are inside. Just the day before yesterday, when my sister came home for the festival, she pledged her ear studs and bought my books for me. We will get the books out somehow. I will tell you a plan. As soon as Saar comes, I will run between his legs and trip him over. Anyway, he will be furious and throw me out. What do you say? I’m soaked in my fear and sweat. Let Saar come!’

‘Ammo! Don’t do that, no matter what you think. Should you treat your teacher like that? I can’t do it. I will say I followed you,’ said Komarelli, and turning to Bal Reddy who had come up by then, said, ‘Saar, Saar, an oath on my studies, Saar, Saidugadu called me out.’

‘Komarelli, I know. I knew it when this madiga fellow joined the school that that son of a bonded ass would learn the alphabet and set the world alight! I wonder how his mother and father dreamt of this, the bloody pricks! This thought will wreck the shudras! Tell me, you bastard Saiduga, is there anybody else of your level in the class? Do you think that just by standing in line with them you have merged with them? You will remain shapeless. This school was known in our district as Saraswati’s own. Because of you, it has now become a slaughterhouse for cattle, hasn’t it? Now, Komarelli, go! Stand in front of the class and bend over holding your ears for an hour. Sonny, when the

hour is up, you must shit and piss in your knickers! Run off now, you donkey, I will take care of this fellow. Why do you stand there looking at me like a goat?'

The cane in his hand landed sharply on Saidulu twice. Then he drove his fists into the boy's chest.

'Saar, Saar, I beg you. I will study. I won't do this again.'

'So both of you went around the school fence, did you? Now you run around the ground and then do a hundred squats holding your ears. I won't beat you. You have fatted on beef. My hand has no effect on your body. You didn't budge even when I held my breath and punched you hard. Komarelli's punishment is not for you.'

A student ran up. 'Saar, Saar! The bell has rung. The maths period now is yours. The class seven students have a drill period, Saar. These students are in the seventh class aren't they? You come with us, Saar.'

'Govind! There is no maths today. You too go and play with your classmates. Today, I just have to take care of Saiduga's tale.'

'Saar, the headmaster sent me. That's why I came running. It seems the syllabus has not been completed.'

'What does he know? Tell him to teach you … Govind. The teachers from other towns come in once a year. Now tell me, is the headmaster a scholar? He has come here on government charity, on a reserved seat. Tell him I said I won't come.'

'Saar, can the headmaster be uneducated? How did he become such a big man?'

'Look here! He came just as you have, being irregular at school. Listen, Govind, you are the monitor aren't you? Go and take care of the class. Get lost!'

'If you had said so then, I would have left. I will go now, Saar.'

'You, Ghousemian, come here!' Bal Reddy exploded, gesturing to him to bring him the chair.

'Ayya, Saar, here's the chair.'

'Not here, put it under that tree.'

'As you command, Saar.'

Bal Reddy said to Saidugadu 'Come there. Come. What am I telling you? Won't you move?' and then turned to the gatekeeper, 'Ghousemian, do you have a pair of tongs?'

'Yes, I do. Shall I bring it?'

'We used it to fix the bolts on the door, the day before yesterday, remember? Hold him by his ears firmly, like you would with those tongs and bring him to the chair. He must scream with pain. Do you know why I'm asking you to? Both of you eat the same beef, that's why.'

‘He is a half-caste, bred of the carcass. We Muslims eat fresh meat. We are stronger. I will bring him for you.’

‘Come, my fellow, come!’

‘Ayyo, my father, oh mother, my ears are ringing! I am dying, Ghousemian!’

‘Quiet, you motherfucker! I will *pretend* to twist your ears. You must come crying out. The teacher is looking. You will surely learn to study, boy. Do you understand what I am saying? Cry, my son, cry! Education is a lie, my son, a lie. It is acting that you must do.’ Raising his voice, Ghousemian now said to Bal Reddy, ‘Saar, I have held him with a grip harder than that of the tongs. He twisted and turned in my hands, weeping. Now you deal with him.’

‘Ghousemian, I can’t hear anything from him. We must somehow drive him out of school. His mother and father live off bondage. It is enough if they get some support in their lives, isn’t it? If we tell him to study, he messes up the other children. You saw, just yesterday, didn’t you? Saidugadu made friends with our kapu lass, Padma. What does that poor baby know? He fed her strips of dried beef. I found out today. What will you learn if you eat beef, ey, Ghousemian?’

‘Yes, Saar, you are a great man. Only you will know what happens. I haven’t studied, have I?’ said Ghousemian aloud, thinking to himself, ‘It seems as if he has no problem with pigs that eat shit, or a fowl that eats snot or a rat, but he is besotted with pure beef fed on grass!’

‘Hey, Ghousemian, what are you muttering? Is this useless chatter?’

‘I don’t understand all this, Saar. I will tell the boy.’

*

Just then, the drill period began. The talking ended. The students marched in one behind the other. Saidugadu walked behind Padma.

‘You and Padma were talking to each other for so long. Will you tell us what about?’ asked his friend marching at his side.

‘Why do you want to know? Do you think she will do as Lakshmi did? I don’t know. Boy, you really are curious!’

‘It seems you played together during the vacation?’

‘Why didn’t you come? It would have been nice to play together.’

‘I want to come to play, Saiduga.’

‘Will you come, then?’

‘No, my father will thrash me.’

[…]

‘Ey, the line is going crooked. Padma and Saiduga have moved to one side. Walk in a straight line, the headmaster is watching,’ said the captain.

‘Straight, straight!’

‘Will you come to meet me, Padma? Tell me.’

‘I will come some other time. Don’t look at me now. Others are watching,’ then in irritation, ‘Ey! Getting arrogant are you? You won’t listen! Are you a small child? You are studying in class seven. Don’t you know anything? Is the line straight, you useless fellow? Let Saar come. He will blow your trumpet. You arrogant bastard! You bad son of a bitch! You are pestering me again and again. I will tell my uncle Bal Reddy. Look out, there he comes. I will tell him. You bad fellow!’

‘Padma, now Bal Reddy patel has seen me. I am begging you. I am sorry. Padma, just keep quiet, will you? I will never mess with you again. When my buffalo strayed into his field, this man beat me black and blue with the stick. I don’t want this study or play. Don’t tell him anything. He is your relative. He hates the sight of me. Padma, I swear on my studies. No, no Padma! O, baby patel amma! Let me go this once. Put your feet towards me for a moment, I will touch them in prayer.’

‘Saar, saar, saar is coming, Saiduga.’

Saiduga shrank, whimpering, ‘I didn’t say anything, Saar. Don’t beat me. Let me correct myself, Saar. No, O patela, I had decided not to come near you, but somehow I have. I will not come to school. I don’t want this study. I don’t want these games. I swear on my mother, on my father and on my education! I will go away from here. I am wrong. I will leave the school. I will never come back. My ears! Saar, my ears are aching. My bottom, my back is hurting from your kicks. My ears are oozing pus from the beating with the thorn twig the day before yesterday. Let me go.’

‘Stand here you donkey. Filthy cunt-lover! Stand here. You prick. Your ears should be cut into strips like dried beef,’ roared the maths teacher.

‘I will stand straight, now. My lord, Saar, you will kill me. My people sent me to school. But this is more like a jungle. They sent me to be killed. I begged that whore, my mother, not to send me, I pleaded with that whoreson, my father, not to. Did they listen? Have they come to see what is happening to me?’

‘Saiduga. All that is unnecessary. The real story must be told. Wait. You, Komarelli, and you, shali girl, tell me what happened.’

‘Saar, Saar, I don’t know. We marched in line as usual. Saidugadu always stands behind Padma. He was in the same place. As we walked, he was pleading with Padma. You came by then. That’s all.’

‘Arey, you children! Your words are equal to those of Lord Brahma. Tell me the truth now. Have you seen a needle? If you tell a lie, when you go up to the sky, God will beat you till you pass through the eye of the needle. He will beat you till you crawl through the toe ring of a slipper. Don’t lie. Are you listening?’

‘Saar, Saar, we know only this much. We told you. Ask Padma. She knows everything.’

Just then, Sathaiah, the headmaster, came up, ‘Mr Bal Reddy, what is happening? The bell rang so long ago. What is this childlike stubbornness? What do these children know? Let them go. Let them be!’

‘Mr Sathaiah, you may well be the headmaster of this school. If the boys are not taught fear now, when will they ever learn? Will you run the school without me? Do so! I won’t come from tomorrow. These vagabonds have no sense of the high and the low. Is everybody equal? Just because you are the headmaster, will we ever be the same?’

‘Sir, you belong to this village. Will the school run without you? Lower your blood pressure. You are the patel of this village. Constantly picking on Saiduga does not befit you. Children, go to your class. Ey Ghousemian, bring two strong cups of tea. Mr Bal Reddy is cross.’

‘Let it go sir. I don’t want this school, the children, or their affection. What do I lose? If I punish one who has done wrong, another will learn. You are not listening to me,’ said Bal Reddy.

‘Look there! Your bonded servant is coming. See what the matter is.’

‘Arey, what do you want, Yaadiga?’

‘Ayya, patela, the ox is ill and bloated. It isn’t eating grass or drinking water.’

‘Ah! Now that’s what you wanted, isn’t it? To take it and feast on it! This is your caste’s only preoccupation. Waiting for when an animal will fall ill. Waiting for it to be given to you. Get lost now! I am coming.’

‘Here sir, drink your tea. Take a week off. Take care of your farm. Come back in peace. Go now,’ said Sathaiah gently.

‘Headmaster, don’t let these fellows loaf about. I will come back in a couple of days.’

‘All right! You go on,’ said the headmaster, and thought, ‘This stubborn fellow thinks of nothing but caste.’ Turning about, he said, ‘What is the matter, Ghousemian, it is 4.30 and you haven’t yet rung the bell? Is Bal Reddy saar running circles in your mind too? Enough, ring the bell, it is time.’

Taka taka takunnatan! The bell rang out and the boys ran home.

A day, two, and a week went by. Attendance. Bal Reddy asked, ‘Has Saidugadu come?’

‘No Saar,’ said a student.

‘It is good that he has gone! A plague has left us. He will at least be a bonded servant in the village. No school, no education for that useless fellow! Let him go. Ah, next.’

‘Yes Saar, yes Saar!’ the children chanted.

‘We have finished seven chapters, have we not? There are tests after this maths period. Study now,’ said the maths teacher.

‘What about Saidugadu, Saar? He was a good boy, and he studied well. We will go to his house and check,’ said Komarelli.

‘Who’s that? Komarelli, is it? Both of you are alike, both sons of donkeys! If you find that ass anywhere, bring him to me. Tell his parents that he isn’t coming to school. Do you understand what I am saying, Komarelli? I am giving you that responsibility.’

‘All right, Saar,’ said Komarelli and went to Saidugadu’s home that evening.

*

‘What, Komarelli, the school has ended, has it? Where is my son? He came back before all of you did both yesterday and the day before. He hasn’t come today. I wonder where he has gone. You have covered your mouth and nose. What’s wrong?’

‘Ey go! A stink! What is this stench?’ asked Komarelli.

‘We have soaked a skin, do you know? We will stitch your chappals from this smelly skin. What do you big people know, though! Tell me about my son, my dear fellow.’

‘I came to find out what the matter was. Saidugadu has not been coming to school for a week. Saar sent me here. The exams are from tomorrow. That is why.’

‘Is that so, my good boy? The mother’s son leaves for school every day, and he eats like a buffalo calf before he leaves. You wait till he comes back! I will split him in two with my cleaver where he stands! Mother, have you seen your son’s antics, woman? From now on, no food for him. One kick should crush his testicles, the son of a cunt! When we asked him to struggle and learn to write, what is it he is teaching us? To slaughter cattle! Come next season, I will make him a bonded servant. Only when the patel kicks him on his arse will he understand. Have you heard, Siddi? Go, find him. Or else, I will split you in two as you stand, like the cow that you are. You bitch, it is your lineage that is such. Have I ever been content with you? Will I ever be satisfied with the fellow born to you? I don’t know. Now get lost, you whore!’

‘I will go right away, your majesty! It is your bloodline alone that is great! You never ever get up when you lie down to rest, and yet your house has had a bumper harvest,’ then angrily, ‘Now keep quiet, you rotten fellow. Who but I will find my son? Will it be you? I know you well. Why are you behind my son and me, you worthless pimp?’ and then finally Siddi pleaded anxiously, ‘He left at dawn eating a handful of rice. Where is he—is he dead or alive? Where will I search for him? Come, my husband, let us both search, I beg you.’

‘Get lost, you whore! You want me to come with you to find that son of a bitch, do you? Look out or I will get you now.’

‘This lousy bastard will beat me,’ she thought and said aloud, ‘Mix the wood chips into the skins. Otherwise the curing pot will sour and spoil the leather, all right? I am going.’ Siddi left, thinking, ‘It is dusk; I wonder where he has gone. His brother ran off to the city. The fledglings have feathered and flown. We thought that the younger son would get an education and find a job, and now this. Has he gone here? Or is he there?’

She hailed the shepherd in the pasture she entered, ‘O Somaiyya! Have you seen my boy on that side of the land? They say he hasn’t gone to school. I wonder what is wrong with him. His father, that son of a bandit, is beating me. May his tribe perish! I have a well in front of me and a deep ditch behind. It is I who has to go around searching. Tell me, have you seen him?’

‘Mother, I saw a boy in a coloured shirt when I was going towards my herd of sheep. I am not sure he is your son, but when the sun was overhead and my sheep went near the monkeypod tree behind the little hillock, I remember seeing a boy there. Do you think it is him—near the gully by that bald rock, where the python roams? It rustles loudly and moves around when it is hungry. There is always that noise near the boundary there. I wonder when it will die. Go, Amma. See that sheep limping? It was bitten on its leg by that snake. It didn’t let go. We wanted to kill it, but it was hurt by neither stick nor rock. When I tried to kill that mother’s son, it shattered my axe and broke my lamb’s leg in two. One part of the leg remained in the python’s mouth. I got that lamb back. That is the kind of bastard snake it is! We are tired of searching for it and trying to beat it to death. It seems to be eating my lambs. As I look, the snake bites them and they fall in a pool of blood and die. How will we stand this? But however much it makes us afraid, it too will have its fear. We have to live here too. Only thing, we should not get caught in its mouth!’

‘Ayyo, my hair is standing on end. Damn you! I won’t go that way. You said you found a boy somewhere. On which side was he? Has he got used to picking berries and nuts to eat? Oh, my man! I am scared. Will anything happen to me? Somehow or the other my son has to survive this and live a few more decades. Tell me how to get there.’

‘You haven’t brought your husband with you! Why have you come to this forest alone woman? Are you mad? Wait!’ and turning around called out, ‘Son, come here!’

‘Oho! Ayyo! I’m helping a lamb feed at her mother’s teat. Tarry a bit, I’m coming e hey!’ yodelled a young voice in reply.

‘Ey! May your lamb be at peace! Come here quickly—there’s something important to do!’ Somaiyya sang back, and turning to Siddi said, ‘Just you wait, my boy’s coming; he too is like your son. Always picking berries and roots to eat. Let us ask him if he has seen your son.’

‘O Ayya! Why did you call?’ asked the boy as he approached.

‘Come, my child. Did you see her son? Have you seen him anywhere? She’s really anxious. I called to ask you this and nothing else.’

‘That mother’s son! Is he a school-going boy? He has been going round these parts the past four or five days. When he sees you, he hides behind the trees or around the hillock. I thought he was behaving funnily because you scolded him. He hides his school bag under the prickly bush. He was standing under the monkeypod tree when I saw him. Son of a … ! What an aim he has! He would hurl a stone and the pods would rain in clusters. He gave me two. Look at those in my jute cape; those are the ones he gave me.’

‘See! This fellow knows. Only a thief knows a thief! No doubt this fellow’s mother was thieving when she was pregnant with him! That’s why he’s born like this. Do you hear!’ said Somaiyya.

‘Okay, my son! Where did you say? Near the hillock? Where? Near the rock, is it?’ asked Siddi.

Somaiyya’s son said, ‘Not there. See that rock over there? Near that boulder, the Pothulinganna boulder. To its left you see the Pochamma snake hill. To its right there is the Beerappa boulder. Behind that boulder is the temple around which there is the shrubbery in which the python roams. Avoid that side. Now I don’t know exactly where your son is. But look around. Don’t go near the snake. If you go west, you will see the place where one day the boy was eating monkeypod pulp and weeping,’ and turning to his father, he went on, ‘Now let’s go. We have to raise the fence around the herd. There’s a lot of work to do,’ and turning back to Siddi, said, ‘What, amma, have you understood? Now go and search for him. We have to go.’

‘O Ayya! I beg you. Let’s go together. I am scared.’

‘O my sister! Ayyo! Terrified? Like the hen who was scared of her house and laid an egg in the bazaar. You haven’t brought your husband and are asking me to go. Am I your husband? You are really the limit. I have my sheep to tend. I won’t come’.

‘O my shepherd! You kind heart! Do you think you are as good as my husband? Is your moustache cut like his? You really talk like a male with his prick in his hand.’

‘Ehe! I was joking. My sheep will stray. Go yourself. I will whistle from here from time to time. The sound will lift the roof of your head—it will make thick moustaches fall off. What do you think?’

*

She set out, ‘Saidi! Ori Saidi! Saidulo! Saiduga! Where are you, my son? Where is your education, my son? It has endangered your life, Saidulo! Oh! This is Beerappa’s boulder. Something rustles! O my mother, may mud fill its mouth. Can whatever happens be more important than my son? I am a woman who has fed four children at her breast. I have borne children like flowers. Why should I be scared? My breasts never dried. My thighs didn’t shudder when my children were born! I offered my body to my husband’s hand on the very day he beat me! What need I fear? Is it more fearsome than he is?’ She tied her saree end around her waist and said, ‘Whatever comes my way, my son as witness, I will squash it to death. It’s the one or the other. Now Saiduga! Saidulu! O Goddess Pochamma, are you here? I want my child. I will make a special prayer to you. This must be the Pothulinganna boulder. O Mother! Look at that owl. It is staring right at my eyes. I am scared. Look at its eyes. It glares at me as if with the dead Narsavva’s eyes. What do you think of me, woman? Do you think I am simple Siddi? I am not a simpleton—I know everything. I have the sitaphal [custard apple] leaf in my hand and can tell your future. I am going upstream. I have courage. How arrogant you are. She’s grabbed acres of land, and has nested owls all over. O Narsavva, I have come for my son. Not for your berries and twigs. Even when you are dead, your spirit is forever in this grove. Your desire for the world hasn’t left you. Your love for oxen and farming has not left you. You were born here. You are now here in the form of an owl. Didn’t you thrash my buttocks with a green stick? As soon as you were married, when I came to the grove after the harvest to pick sitaphals, I remember your arrogant anger. You cast aside others as if they were snot! You made the bondsmen in your house dance to your command. How did life ever come to you? But you died, O Narsavva! When my son and your grandson went to school, you said, “Will your son become a doctor saar alongside my boy? Make that useless fellow tend cattle.” Once, just because my son touched your grandson, you made him bathe with his clothes on. I know. It seems as if you have become a demon and are answering calls. Damn your miserly face, woman! You pick grain even from dung and eat it. I knew you were haunting these parts and wanted me—that’s why I have some jeedi seeds in my saree end to make your spirit turn away from me. I also stepped with my left slipper on shit, and if you come near me, I will hit you with it. You widowed swine! You may be a demon, but don’t you look for us. We live in

the last house in the settlement. We live combing leftover paddy from the ground. If my husband knows about you, he will make you run! Look now, this is the power of the lowest caste, O my village patel's wife!

'Saidi, my son! I have heaped a long list of abuses on the patel woman and she will not interfere with you from now on. The shepherd boy said that you had come this way. Near the boulder. There are owl droppings just here. Damn you, you owl, you have shat as much as a man. Why has my dear boy come here? He has ground some chalk on the rock. He has sketched a man. Oh, my son has drawn a picture! I have a son made of gold. He astonishes me. My husband seems to have drunk a powerful colostrum, the damned wife-whorer! Here are monkeypod shells and sitaphal skin.

'The wild animals of the forest take care of orphans. I bore you for nine months and bred you for sixteen years, my darling son. You couldn't tell me of your suffering. Did you think your father would beat you? How did you think that? If he doesn't see you for a day, he will suffer within. He has an angry heart, but it is soft inside. Why did you do this, O son of mine?

'Oh my! Is this the tail of that python? The snake is here too. Oh my men, hurry up, it is right here. This patel snake, damn it! It is as long as a patel! It's exactly like that. I wonder what it has eaten, it does not stir. It has fatted on stolen food. Where shall I go now, I know not! Is this barrier large enough to bar my son? How big it is and what can't it do? Let me go near and look at it. Oh my! Its head is smashed and it's dead. The patel too died in this same way. I wonder what sin struck him; he died exactly like this. The shepherd Somaiyya is not short of courage; he may be the one who killed it. We think he is an innocent shepherd. How brave he must be. So what if the snake's dead? It is a vicious creature isn't it? Let it die.

'This is the Beerappa boulder! Where is the lad? There he is, sleeping on the boulder. That golden boy! You are the lord of this terrain, my son. O Mother, why do you have blood on your face? Have you broken your head or something? Oh, my son, I thought you were fine—what is all this, my child? Saidi, O Saidi, my son, what has happened? Curse the man who's hurt you! They didn't care that you were a child, my son. My Saidaiyya, who will hear our sobbing in these woods? Ammo, he breathes—he is alive, my son. Wake up my child, let's go home. I have cooked a cow's brain for you.'

'Bal Reddy saar isn't letting me go to school. He thrashes me! He will kill me. I don't want to go to that school. It is as evil as our village Panchayati Board. Our people are not there in that school. Those lessons are not ours. Bal Reddy saar simply searches for an excuse to beat me up. I don't want this, my mother. I won't go to school. I will become a bonded servant. Those cattle are better than the saars. They won't let me live, Mother.'

'You donkey, is this your house that you blabber in your dreams?'

‘I don’t want to study. Father will thrash me, and so will the Saar. O Mother, just kill me. I don’t want to live, Mother, they will send me to school. I will run away from here.’

‘No my son, don’t flee. My feet have fallen off in my wanderings behind you this time. I won’t send you to school, my son, my dear. Don’t run away my child—come back. Why will I make you suffer?’

Saidugadu continued to run.

Somaiyya called from the distance, ‘O sister! Is this your son? He runs as if bandits follow him? Wait, boy! Stop running. Stop!’ then ferociously, ‘Do you see this axe in my hand! It will cleave you in half. Son of a bitch! You run faster than a ram, do you? I’ll follow and tackle you, throw you to the ground. Cunt lover! Wait. If my lasso circles your neck, you’ll just die. Where do you think you are roaming? Do you think this pasture belongs to your father? We paid rent for this place. Do you know what will happen if the patel sees you? He will cut your balls off. You will become useless to your wife. Where will you run?’

Saidugadu stopped. ‘Okay, I won’t run. Don’t kill me, Sir! I will wait. Tell them not to send me to school. I will bond myself to you. You tell them this and I won’t go anywhere.’

‘Go home with your mother. Why do you behave like this? Were you born under a mad constellation, you ass?’ Somaiyya turned to the woman and called out. ‘O Siddi, I have caught your son. Come here,’ and turning back to the boy, ‘She wore out her feet searching for you, and yet you are giving her so much trouble, you rascal.’

‘My good man, I am coming. Hold him as you would a dog. I am hurrying there.’

‘Look this axe, how sharp it is. Now go,’ said Somaiyya, ‘What’s your name, fellow?’

‘Saidulu.’

‘Will you go to your mother? Go!’

‘Don’t do anything to me. I’ll go. My underwear is wet!’

‘So what if you have wet your pants? Get going now! Look at your clothes. Donkey!’

‘Don’t say anything more to him, Sir. He has wet his pants. Come, my dear, let’s go home. This good man won’t beat you. Am I not there to protect you? I won’t send you to that school. It doesn’t matter. Have our generations needed education to survive? Golla Somaiyya, I am indebted to you. We’ll go now. You have been a great help.’

‘These lads are all like this. They take a step back when we ask them to study. I wonder what the purpose of the school is. In the past, we would fear the landlord’s

mansion. Now these children fear the school building. My son is the same—like your boy who wet his pants. He has come back to herd sheep. Go now.'

Changing the subject, Siddi asked, 'You killed such a big snake and lied about it, did you? I was so scared in the pit of my stomach that I froze in terror. I held on to dear life with my son's image in my mind.'

'Is it dead? Damn its mate! The wretch! It swallowed my lamb's leg. I hoped then that it would fall into a hunter's trap and die. Has it died really now? I didn't kill it. Why would I lie?' asked Somaiyya.

'Yes, it has. Its life's gone. Damned snake.'

'Mother, you know about that snake! What … what happened was this …,' began Saidugadu.

'Don't talk about the snake. You'll wet your pants again. Don't so much as open your mouth or Bal Reddy saar will come now!'

'Okay! I won't say anything. I don't want Saar to come. I am sorry. Father won't say anything, will he? I hope you have hidden the cleaver. Otherwise he will threaten to split me in two like a calf.'

'I have hidden it, hidden it among the tools. He won't beat you now.'

*

'O my husband! O man of my house! Are you here? The gaundla woman has some toddy. She is calling you! Go on!'

'Have you returned, woman? Did you find him? My heart is filled with anxiety for the boy. How could my thoughts turn towards toddy?'

'As if he was born to your arse! As if you searched him out! You bad-arse bum! Bring that brain curry. The boy is hungry.'

'Where is he? Where did you go, boy? Damn school! It doesn't matter. You can survive slaughtering cattle. Do you think I take pleasure in your suffering? Come with me. Let's go drink a bottle of toddy.'

'Look at his love! The man must have his drink. He must have his choice titbits of meat. Crazy bastard! Like father like son! Get lost. Get drunk and get back!'

[…]

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This second volume of new dalit writing from South India would not have been possible without the support, involvement and collaboration of a large number of writers, translators, scholars, critics, activists and friends. It may be difficult to adequately acknowledge their enormous contribution and the innumerable ways in which that was made, but we can place on record our own enjoyment of the work, no small part of which was a result of what we learnt in the process.

Aware that the Kannada dalit upsurges date back to the 1970s and that far from being a marginal group, dalit writers represent the face of contemporary Kannada literature, we began with a tentative list of writers, critics and activists from Karnataka and travelled to Bangalore, Mysore, Kolar, Hampi and other places to meet them.

In Bangalore, we met and had discussions with the writers L. Hanumanthaiah, Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy, Du Saraswathi, Kotiganahalli Ramaiah, Siddalingaiah, Thumbadi Ramaiah, Subbu Holeyar, Indudhara Honnapura and members of the Bayalu Team. We were also able to meet Indira Krishnappa and other members of the B. Krishnappa Memorial Trust. We met some of them in their homes and enjoyed their hospitality; others in their work places or sometimes at a central location in the city. We visited ADIMA in Kolar and met K.B. Siddaiah at his home in Tumkur where he proudly directed our attention to his grandfather's curing urn. Mogalli Ganesh and B.T. Jahnavi took the trouble to travel to Bangalore to give us detailed interviews. Through these interviews, we were taken back in time to the momentous 1970s and brought back to the present as we listened to their recollections, anecdotes and experiences—and occasionally the rendering of a song—in the dalit movement.

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Books such as these that are the work of many hands are more than books, they are small movements.

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PRAISE FOR *DOSSIER I*

‘Satyanarayana and Tharu’s “dossier” maps the radicalisation of dalit consciousness even as it traces the contours of an energized Indian literary scene and a history of publishing that has never received due attention … *No Alphabet in Sight* might well be the alternative history of Indian literature we have been waiting for.’

—The Hindu

‘This volume has been researched from the ground up and culls years of writing and theory from an array of little magazines. This approach reveals much about the natures of literary and political culture.’

—The Indian Express

‘By highlighting the cultural richness and creative vibrancy in the social life of the dalit communities, this volume exposes the shallowness of the dominant view that considers dalits, almost exclusively, to be in a perpetual state of victimhood, oppression and subjugation and thereby treats them as passive receptors of dominant culture.’

—Economic & Political Weekly

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Footnotes

Introduction

[1] K. Satyanarayana and Susie (Eds), *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India Dossier I: Tamil and Malayalam*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2011.

[2] The information here is taken from N.K. Hanumanthaiah's biography of Basavalingappa, translated by V. Sreedhara, portions of which also appear in this volume. The version put out by a leading Kannada daily had 'boosa' in the headline and read: 'If we do not borrow rich ideas from other languages, what would remain in Kannada is boosa' (Raghavan and Manor 2009: 52). See also Shetty 1978: 20–55.

[3] *Prajavani*, 29 November 1973; cited in Shetty 1978: 42–43.

[4] The scholar and playwright G.P. Deshpande makes a similar observation about how the Dalit Panthers of the late 1960s transformed the way Marathi literature was understood. The canon as it existed could no longer be regarded simply as Marathi literature. It carried the mark of caste placed on it by the Panthers (interview with Rahul Jondhale, Hyderabad, 2011).

[5] Janaki Nair notes, 'The imagination of the leaders of the Navodaya (New Dawn) movement in Kannada literature in the early 20th century was grounded in a brahminic, even Vedic notion of culture' (Nair, 1994: 2854). This highly Sanskritized grounding, dalit commentators point out, could be found even in the Pragatisheela (Progressive) literature of the 1940s and '50s, as well as the Navya (Modernist) writers who came to the fore in the 1950s.

[6] V.T. Rajasekhara Shetty notes with regret that 'Basavalingappa had not even a soul among the top literary persons in Kannada to support him during the "boosa controversy" and the voices of lesser luminaries were drowned in the noise of war drums that gripped the State. After his ouster, both Kuvempu and Ananthamurthy came out in his support. Ananthamurthy said at a conference in far off Mercara in December 1973: "[P]eople should welcome criticisms from scheduled castes to liberate society consisting mostly of lower classes."' (*Deccan Herald*, 3 December 1973). That was a sentiment Kuvempu echoed more strongly at the Kannada Writers and Artists Vokkuta in Mysore in April 1974.

[7] See Raghavan and Manor for a discussion of political innovation in the Devraj Urs regime.

[8] See Shetty: (1978: 28–35) for a discussion of the 'sordid role' played by the Kannada and English press, and especially the Delhi-based Jan Sangh–RSS's *Organizer*.

[9] Possibly as a result of the connection with the Dalit Panthers and the Lohiaite interest in the caste question, Kannada translations of some writings of Ambedkar were available before the official translation began in the 1990s.

[10] The English translation of Parts 1 and 2 of this autobiography have been republished as *The Place Outside,* Navayana, 2012.

[11] The role played by Devaiah Harve, an important thinker from the early DSS days who died early, is noted by many and calls for further primary research.

[12] N. Narsimaiah (d. 2011) was the leading detective-story writer in Kannada and was both popular and prolific. He had over 500 works to his credit.

[13] The booklet on the Kambalapalli carnage provides a brief account of DSS activity in Kolar district. View the booklet online at http://www.ambedkar.org/books/kc.htm

[14] An initial divide arose in 1986 over the question of whether to participate in the elections and stand for office. With the emergence of the BSP and its sudden rise in the mid-1990s in national politics, the conflicts became more serious.

[15] Jeevan Kumar and K. Ananda (2001) cite and discuss six reasons commonly offered for the splits and the disarray in the DSS. They also reproduce the text of the 1984 Constitution.

[16] See Katti Padma Rao's essay in this volume.

[17] See Katti Padma Rao's essay in this volume and also Balagopal (2011: 64–69) for a detailed account of the massacre.

[18] See JNM Publication (1995: 23).

[19] See Balagopal (2011: 205–23) and Srinivasulu (2002) for a detailed discussion of these issues.

[20] Both CPI and CPI (M) are referred to as parliamentary Left parties as they participate in elections and do not advocate armed struggle as a form of struggle for social change.

[21] See Kalekuri's poem 'For a Fistful of Self-Respect' in this volume.

[22] See Srinivasulu (2002) for a detailed list and account of some of the atrocities.

[23] The parties that are inspired by Mao's concept of armed struggle, such as UCCRI (Unity Centre of Communist Revolutionaries of India), Janasakti, People's War (now

known as the CPI [Maoist] party), CPI (ML–New Democracy), among others, are known as Marxist–Leninist parties. Unlike the parliamentary Left, the CPI and CPI (M), these parties do not participate in elections. Some parties call for a boycott of elections and others contest in some constituencies to demonstrate that the elections are fake.

24 The Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee is a civil rights organization that was established during the Emergency to defend the rights of the peasant activists. VIRASAM (Viplava Rachayitala Sangham) is a literary organization of ML movements in Andhra Pradesh. It is referred to as RWA (Revolutionary Writers' Association) in the all-India literary scene.

25 Noted fiction writer and scholar Kolakaluri Enoch (b. 1939–) is considered one of the early dalit writers. He wrote stories on dalits titled 'Oorabavi Kathalu' before the rise of contemporary dalit movement in the 1980s. The dalit story 'Oorabavi'was first published in 1969.

26 In the 1980s and 1990s, the category of dalit literature was conceptualized as an oppositional category to the dominant modern form, revolutionary literature in Telugu. See Satyanarayana (2012) for an elaboration of this view.

27 In his interview with us, K. Srinivas referred to the discussion of Khader Moinuddin's poem 'Puttu Machcha' (Birthmark, 1991) and the first collection of feminist poetry *Neeli Meghalu* (Blue Clouds, 1993) as key events. Khader's poem opened with the line, 'Even before I am born, my name is listed as anti-national', referring to the stereotyping of Muslims as terrorists. The debate around *Neeli Meghalu* is discussed later in this introduction.

28 See Kalekuri's essay, 'The Dalit Movement and the Dalit Literary Movement', in this volume for an account of these developments.

29 *Chikkanavutunna Pata* (A Thickening Song, 1995), edited by G. Lakshmi Narasaiah and Tripuraneni Srinivas, is the first anthology of dalit poetry in Telugu. This was followed by *Padunekkina Pata* (A Sharpened Song, 1996), edited by G. Lakshmi Narasaiah and others.

30 Yadav (1999) observes that Shyam Sunder was one of the first Ambedkarites in Karnataka. He established the Bheem Sena, a militant organization named after Ambedkar, in 1968 in northern Karnataka. Also see Mane (1994) for a brief historical account of the dalit movement in Karnataka from colonial times to the 1970s.

31 The struggle against nude worship was controversial and widely discussed. Writings available in English include Epp (2003), Ananthamurthy (2009) and Radhika (2012).

32 Arun K. Patnaik's essay 'Lohia's Immanent Critique of Caste' (no date) remains very useful in understanding Lohia's perspective on caste.

[33] For a brief account of Samudaya, see Nair (2005: 109–11).

[34] Samudaya Theatre Company was established by R.P. Prasanna, a graduate from the National School of Drama in 1975. The Company included Prasanna, Viranna, Ki Ram Nagaraj, Shudra Srinivas, K.V. Narayana, D.R. Nagaraj, C.G. Krishnaswamy, Janardhan, Hasakru, Siddalingaiah, Baraguru Ramachandrappa and B.V. Karanth, among others

[35] G. Kalyana Rao notes that the Jana Natya Mandali, VIRASAM and Radical Students Union of People's War played an important role in the Karamchedu movement in the initial days before the formation of the Dalit Mahasabha. In 1989, the People's War Naxalites killed the main accused in the Karamchedu case to win over the dalits to their ideological orientation. See Kalyana Rao's foreword to *Karamchedu Porata Katha: Oggu Katha*, JNM Publication, 17 July 1995.

[36] For a historical account of the dalit movement in Andhra Pradesh see Ratnam (2008).

[37] Ambedkar visited coastal Andhra in 1944. His visit inspired dalit youth and a branch of the Scheduled Caste Federation was formed (Omvedt 1994: 288–91).

[38] One of the first biographies of Ambedkar, *Dr. Ambedkar Jeevita Charitra* (Biography of Dr Ambedkar), written by Dr Endluri Chinnaiah, was published in 1968. There have been ten editions of this book, which continues to be widely read in Andhra Pradesh.

[39] See Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (1991).

[40] *Sivasagar Kavitvam (1968–2004)*, a collection of Sivasagar's poetry, gives us an insight into his life and perspective. It was edited by Gurram Seetaramulu.

[41] CPI (ML) People's War party published its document 'Bharatadesam lo Kula Samasya—Mana Dhrukpatham' (The Caste Question in India: Our Perspective) in 1997, the Dalita Bahujana Sramika Vimukthi party of Veeranna brought out 'India lo Yemicheyyali?' (What is to be Done in India?) in 2001, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) adopted a resolution at the All India Convention on Problems of Dalits in New Delhi in 2006.

[42] This is the title story of a collection.

[43] http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=comcontent&view=article&id=5364: my-man&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132 accessed on 27/7/12; some changes have been made in the text's layout.

[44] The scheduled castes are mentioned in a list of untouchable castes recognized by the government. See the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950.

[45] For a detailed discussion of the movement, see Balagopal 2011: 427–44.

[46] See P. Muthaiah, pp. 534–45 and interview with Krishna Madiga, pp. 658–674.

[47] Social Welfare (J1) Department G.O.Ms.No. 68, dated 6 June 1997.

[48] This account is based on the interview with Ambanna, a leader of the MRHS, Raichur, 18 November 2012.

[49] Sudhakar's 'Drum Beat' is included in this volume.

[50] This is a point made by Professor P. Muthaiah, one of the writers in this volume.

[51] For an account of the madiga perspective on literature, see Venkateswararao 2008.

[52] See a report in *The Hindu*, 14 April 2012, at http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/article3313296.ece

[53] See a news report on this event at http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-05-02/-beef-festival-in-india-sets-off-outrage-and-misogyny.html

[54] Upasamskriti is a series of monographs that describe the culture and practice of particular communities (generally the castes which came under 'dalit' category, but also some other backward communities). It was published by Karnataka Sahitya Akademi. Critic and scholar Baraguru Ramachandrappa was the chairman of the Akademi at the time the series was launched and also its general editor. In his preface, he termed the cultural practices of each of these communities as a sub-culture, on the principle that they form part of the larger Kannada culture.

[55] Interviews with the critics Banjagere Jayaprakash, Bangalore, 11 February 2011, and Sivasundar, Bangalore, 13 February 2011.

PART I: KANNADA
B. Krishnappa

[1] ‘Bash them, kick them.’ The reference is to the famous poem ‘Ondu Pada’ (Song) by Siddalingaiah, also included in this collection.

[2] These are gowda and brahmin characters in Kuvempu’s widely read novels, as are Halepaika Seshanaika, Hameera Nayaka, Bachcha, etc.

[1] The dry shell of the pumpkin is used as a float when swimming across dangerous rivers; when transporting material, long gourds are tied to the rafts.

[1] *Odalala* literally means the depth of one's being. Here it could mean 'the heart of hunger' or 'the bowels/innards of hunger'. On yet another plane, it could stand for 'the heart of nothingness' or 'being and nothingness'.

[2] The text is based on a lecture delivered at a seminar on 'Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance,' National Law School of India University, Bangalore, 3 August 2001.

[1] The mark of Vishnu/Shiva on his forehead.

[1] Tattered-dhoti: the Kannada expression ‘kachche-haruka’ (lit: dhotis with holes) is used derogatorily to refer to those people in high places who talk loftily about morality, but are not themselves above board, especially regarding sex.

[2] S.L. Bhyrappa (b. 1930). Prolific, best-selling and hugely influential Kannada novelist. His works have been translated into other Indian languages, especially Marathi, and made into extremely popular films such as *Vamshavriksha* (The Scion, 1972), *Godhuli* (Dusk, 1976) and *Naayi Neralu* (The Dog and the Shadow, 2006). Bhyrappa is often described as a ‘vedantist’ and believes that Indians must return to their cultural and philosophical roots if they are to be truly ‘free’ of Western domination. Dalits and other progressive thinkers consider his work revivalist and brahminical.

[1] A ‘touchable’ dalit caste. See Introduction.

[2] Angulimala is an important figure in Buddhist mythology. He is a killer who strung the thumbs of those he had killed into a necklace but is redeemed by a sincere conversion to Buddhism. He is considered an example of the redemptive power of the Buddha’s teaching and the universal human potential for spiritual progress, regardless of an individual’s background.

[3] Madlakki is a reference to the rice used in ritual offerings to women in key periods —puberty, marriage, pregnancy. The rice is traditionally poured into the sari pallu resting on the woman’s lap.

[4] MDN is Prof. M.D. Nanjundaswamy, well-known Raita Sangha leader; BK is the founder president of the DSS, B. Krishnappa.

[5] Ravi Kumar Varma, an advocate.

[6] Mari of letters: Mari refers to a female dalit deity. However, Aksharamari (dalit goddess of letters/learning) is invented and invoked by the poet.

[1] ‘Ooru’ is the touchable or savarna caste area of the village and the ‘keri’ is a place outside that in which dalits live. This is an autobiography in two parts, now available from Navayana (2012) in one volume.

[1] This is a translation of a Telugu song by the poet Cherabandaraju, of the Revolutionary Writers' Association, or VIRASAM. The people's poet and balladeer Gaddar sings it in Telugu.

[2] Some of the information in this paragraph is taken from earlier chapters in the biography; the intention is to introduce KB.

[1] This is an excerpt from the article, with scholarly references and annotations omitted, in keeping with the style of this book.

[2] In the 1930s, this struggle took place in different parts of the country. In Belgaum, the dalits took names that had an upper-caste origin. See my 'Dalit Literary Movement: A Philosophical Analysis'. In 1927, members of the Satnami community started wearing the sacred thread. Ambedkar reports that many people were actually murdered for this reason. See 'Selected Articles from Dr Ambedkar's journal *Bahishkrita Bharat*' ('Outcaste India', translated by Dattatreya Pujari).

L. Hanumanthaiah

[1] O. Sridharan held the post of curator in the Government of India's Archaeology Department. The others are authors you will meet within these pages.

1 ‘Chammavuge’ means leather sandals. ‘Urichammavuge’ means fiery or flaming sandals. This key story in the Manteswamy tradition concerns sandals made of human skin which have magical powers. In this poem, Shankanapura superimposes two urichammavuge episodes. The first concerns Basavanna and dates back to the twelfth century, while the other relates to Malemadeshwara.

2 A reference to the *Anubhava Mantapa*, a spiritual parliament established by Basava in the twelfth century, as well as to the contemporary Legislative Assembly.

3 It appears sometimes as seventy-seven hills and other times as seven. Mahadeva explains that both figures appear in different renderings of the epic and both are imaginative truths.

4 This is an important episode in the *Manteswamy Kavya.* The Panchala chieftains of Halaguru belonged to the blacksmith caste and had effected proprietorship over the production of iron. Since iron was in demand everywhere, the chieftains became rich and, over time, very arrogant. They set up a monopoly. To bar others from their region, they posted four fearsome spirits at the four entrances to the area. There are several versions of what happens afterwards but all of them involve seeking iron as alms. For example, because the monopoly caused a scarcity in agricultural implements, farmers and artisans were in despair; Manteswamy sees the plight of the farmers and artisans and orders Kempachari to go and seek ‘iron as alms’ from the chieftains. In another variation, Manteswamy decides to hand over the reins of the neelagara order to Kempachari and enter the nether world. But he needed iron implements to dig his way through and did not find any due to the embargo. So, he frees Kempachari from the snake-infested cave, gives him the name Siddappaji and orders him to go to the chieftains and get him the iron implements.

Subbu Holeyar

[1] Established in 1949, Ninasam (Nilakanteshwara Natyaseva Samgha) is a centre for culture and theatre at Heggodu, Shimoga in Karnataka. It was formed as a rural amateur drama troupe immediately after Independence but it has branched off into several initiatives in art, education and publishing. Its co-founder Late K.V. Subbanna was conferred the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Creative Arts, Communication and Journalism in 1991.

1 This refers to a tradition of selecting an ‘untouchable’ woman for dedication to a temple. After this dedication she is sexually available to the upper-caste men of the village. Devadasi, basavi, jogini and matangi all refer to similar practices in other regions.

2 ‘Owner’ is colloquial usage in Bangalore for the boss in any private set-up. Thus the word may be used by a domestic worker to refer to the head of a household or by wage labourers to a contractor, as Unnikrishnan does here.

3 Place where the workers gather three times a day to mark their attendance.

4 Dodda Sampige in the Biligiri Hills of Karnataka is one of the important places of worship for the soliga tribe who reside in and around Biligirirangana Betta of Chamarajanagar district. Jade Madha is a deity worshipped under a huge sampige/ champak tree. The poem translated here, ‘Jeeva Sampige’ was written by the author after her visit to this place.

5 Jade Madha is the one of the clan deities of soliga tribe. It is also a common name for soliga males and Jade Madhi for females. The poet has interchanged the use of Jade Madha and Jade Madhi. She is inspired by the concept of God among the soligas, which is beyond the limits of gender.

[1] This is a reference to a sentence from Devanoora Mahadeva's *Kusumabale* and is also the title of a collection of articles on Mahadeva. When the 'creativity' of a dalit (i.e., the picture of a peacock drawn on the walls of the hut that no hands can seize) is romanticized, the fact that the reference is to a police raid on the hut, where they seize everything except the drawing on the walls of the hut, is missed.

[2] Puttaiah is citing parts of key lines from memory; for a translation of the whole poem, see Siddalingaiah's 'Ambedkar' in this volume.

[1] An improvised and progressive marriage ritual, introduced by Kuvempu. He was the one to christen it ‘Mantra Mangalya’. The ritual did away with the mediatory role of the priest, matching horoscopes, fixing an ‘auspicious’ time, giving presents, inviting over 200 people, and so on.

[1] A poem written in the wake of the Kambalapalli massacre of 2000 and the judgment of 2006, in which the court dismissed the case against those who burnt alive seven dalits on grounds of insufficient evidence (because during those six years, all forty witnesses had turned hostile).

[2] Takamurya: the practice of a landlord meeting the policeman to lodge a complaint of theft against someone he does not like.

[1] This is a series of publications based on special lectures delivered at Hampi University.

[2] Gandaberunda, a mythological two-headed bird, was the emblem of the Wodeyar rulers; the same bird is now democratic Karnataka's state emblem.

PART II: TELUGU
Sivasagar (K.G. Satyamurthy)

[1] VIRASAM is a literary organization of Marxist–Leninist movements in Andhra Pradesh. It is referred to as Revolutionary Writer's Association (RWA) in the all-India literary scene.

[2] See for further reference, *Sivasagar Kavitvam (1968–2008)*, edited by Gurram Seetaramulu, Swetcha Prachuranalu, Khammam, 2004.

G. Kalyana Rao

[1] The most important of these are: *Toli Poddu*, *Satire*, *Kulam*, *Laakapu*, *Jailu*, *Parliamentu Paikhanna*, *Idiot* and *Sakshi*. Many of these have not been published.

[2] Though this is the same prefix, indicating 'younger', the author represents the upper and dalit versions of it differently. Thus, the landlords are referred to formally as 'Chinna', and the dalit, more familiarly, as 'Cinna'.

[1] Literally uncle, but also used to address any elder with respect and affection.

[2] The name of the person referred to here is Nagaiah, but the upper castes refer to him using the pejorative diminutive ‘Nagigadu’.

[3] Anna literally means elder brother, but is generally used as a respectful form of address, showing (familial) intimacy.

1 The sage Apastamba is reputed to have lived on the banks of the Gautami River (in today's Andhra Pradesh) and to have composed *Dharma Sutras* and *Grihya Sutras*, laying down rules and practices to be followed by brahmins in daily life from birth to death. Given the fact that the Sanskrit scholar Max Mueller had famously argued that the Apastambas and other similar prescriptive aphorisms were later codifications that had turned the philosophical Vedas into metrical law books, Sikhamani's reference to the ritualized culture and practices of the brahmins is satirical.

2 The reference is to the 6,000 brahmins brought from the north by rulers in the Andhra region and appointed to military and administrative tasks. These brahmins gave up their priestly occupations. Among the many well-known descendants of these 6,000 niyogi brahmins from Andhra are India's second President, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and the former Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao.

3 Appakavi, the first and most authoritative Telugu grammarian and commentator on poetry. He wrote what is known as the *Appakaviyamu*, which is a commentary on Nannaya's *Andhra Sabda Cintamani*. Before Appakavi's intervention, no poet was supposed to use a word that had not appeared in Nannaya's first Telugu rendering of the Mahabharata. In this sense, he freed Telugu from classical restrictions. Sikhamani, of course, has other observations to make about Appakavi's oeuvre.

4 SC—Scheduled Caste; OC—Other Castes. These official categories have become common parlance.

5 The title of this poem, 'Savarnandhra' (lit: an Andhra brimming with colour/caste discrimination; also brahmin Andhra) is a satirical pun on the campaign slogan by the TDP leader Chandrababu Naidu that he would transform Andhra Pradesh into Swarnandhra Pradesh (Golden Andhra Pradesh).

[1] See Introduction for a discussion of these definitive controversies.

[2] Sakuni Mama, the uncle of the Kauravas in the Mahabharata, is one of the most hated personalities in Hindu scriptures.

[3] The title is taken from Gurajada Apparao's poem 'Deshabhakti' (1910).

[1] Kannamaneedu or Kannamadasu is the famous mala warrior and army commander who served under Palnati Brahma Naidu in the Battle of Palnadu fought in the Andhra region in the twelfth century.

[1] Translated here are two sections, 11 and 14 from the long poem, *Hindu Mahasamudram*. The poem is a critique of Hindutva politics from a dalit perspective.

[2] A satiric allusion to an acclaimed poem by Karunasri, a modern Telugu poet, who writes in metrical and rhymed verse; the translation has not been able to replicate that, but the exalted tone for fairly banal sentiments will be evident.

[3] The word ‘desavali’ means ‘native’ or ‘indigenous’ in Telugu.

1 ‘Meerevutlu … ?’, the title of this poem, literally translates as ‘what people are you?’ However, the question, with this unusual inflection, is actually an inquiry about one’s caste.

2 Turaka: those who came from Turkey. Muslims are commonly referred to as ‘turaka’ in Telugu.

Manda Krishna Madiga

[1] This interview took place on 9 December 2011, and was transcribed by Panthukala Srinivas.

[2] According to this GO, the Andhra Pradesh government would repatriate all non-local candidates appointed in the Telangana region to their native zones and appoint local candidates in the resultant vacancies, implicitly acknowledging that the appointments were illegal.

[1] ‘Ganda’ is a word derived from Kannada and means man. In these south-eastern border areas of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, ganda joginis are expected to fulfil the sexual requirements of other men in the village.

1 It organized the important conference ‘Manalo Manam’, which aimed at bringing all women writers together on a joint forum in 2009 at Anakapalle.

2 Suvarthamma’s raising of her water pot (to ward off the knife that was thrown at her) was taken as an offence and was the ostensible reason for the kammas going on a rampage, killing over a dozen dalits in Karamchedu in 1985. See ‘Introduction’ and the essay by Katti Padma Rao in this volume.

3 The reference here is to a series of attacks on dalit women in the 1990s. Sajjalagudem Mahadevamma, a dalit woman and a basavi, was gang-raped. Muttavva, a low-caste woman, was paraded naked in a village in Nalgonda district. Dalit poets reacted sharply to these atrocities.

4 This is reference to Kondepudi Nirmala’s poem, ‘Labour Room’, that stirred Telugu literary circles in the 1990s. Some [male] dalit critics argued that the experience of the labour room (as against the field or the home) is clearly an upper-caste one.

[1] Gudipudi Venkata Chalam (1894–1979) is an esteemed modern Telugu writer, widely appreciated as a crusader for women's emancipation and for celebrating the individuality and sexuality of women in his writings.

[2] This is a reference to the parable of the lost son/the prodigal son, which Vinodini uses to write about a 'lost' dalit girl.

[1] Originally published in the journal *South Asia Research*, vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 127–49. Copyright (c) Sage Publications. This is a condensed version of the article, reproduced with the permission of the copyright holders and publishers. We have reduced scholarly references and annotations, in keeping with the style of this book.

[1] A traditional performance by kuruma, baindla and other lower-caste communities in the Telangana region, in which stories of village/community gods are dramatically presented.

[2] What happened, as we find out later, though he does not expressly say so here, is that someone in the family had to take a loan and he was required to work as part of the 'pay back' deal.

from those stubs,

steel nibs are sprouting

NEW DALIT WRITING FROM SOUTH INDIA

Dossier II
Kannada and Telugu

edited and introduced by
K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu